

PEN-FULL RESISTANCE: POETRY, POWER, AND PERSONA

by

Naliyah Kaya  
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Submitted to the  
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of  
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## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to all who have been a part of my journey and to Poetry for its activism, evolution, and ability to change and save lives.

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## **List of Abbreviations or Symbols**

American Sign Language.....	ASL
District of Columbia. ....	D.C.
District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia.....	DMV
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer.....	LGBTQ
Question and Answer.....	Q & A

## **Abstract**

PEN-FULL RESISTANCE: POETRY, POWER, AND PERSONA

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This dissertation explores the concepts of agency and structure in relation to the phenomenon of spoken word performance culture. Many have argued that the art form serves as a site of resistance for the disadvantaged self—those selves/identities that have traditionally been underrepresented, marginalized and/or oppressed; however, some would question if this cultural medium—largely dismissed and denigrated by the gatekeepers of society—can effectively address the causes of inequality so frequently referenced by poets. Guided by the overarching question of how and why disadvantaged selves use the arts to define and address inequality and social problems, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions: *What themes emerge overall in spoken word performance poetry? What types of public selves are exhibited or described by performers, and which social problems/topics are these selves connected to?*

## Introduction

Despite decades of progress, inequality continues to pervade American society. The 2012 presidential election illustrated that issues such as equal pay for women, reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, racism and access to healthcare, affordable housing and a quality education are far from being relics of the past. For many, the re-election of President Obama exemplifies the refusal of those most affected by the above-mentioned social problems, to be silenced—their desire to be represented by someone who is concerned with what troubles them and who speaks on their behalf.

Throughout history the ability to be heard and the power to define have often been held by a select few. Marx (1986:64) argued that the prevailing ideas of a society stem from those who own the means of production. Thus, those individuals who have historically been at the top of the hierarchy have had the greatest influence in determining which groups' stories are told and *how* they are told. In America, individuals at the top of the hierarchy have traditionally been wealthy, white, heterosexual, and male.

There are numerous examples, worldwide, of dominant groups silencing the stories, of those they have oppressed, through social and/or economic exclusion (e.g. the Dalits (oppressed) or “untouchables” of India, the Burakumin (hamlet people) or “village people” of Japan, the Roma of Europe...). In America, non-whites, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, have been subjected to systematic social segregation

(e.g. Jim Crow laws) as well as aggressive attempts to erase their cultural identities through forced assimilation (e.g. Native American boarding schools). One of the latent functions of social segregation and forced assimilation has been the silencing of the public self. For example, while laws against teaching enslaved individuals to read and write were largely enacted to keep them enslaved, thus limiting the probability of slave rebellions, they also served to limit the transmission of familial, cultural, historical, and social information.

By attempting to silence the selves of those they treated inhumanely, the dominant group could ensure their history would be told and written in a way so as to exclude and modify a past of negative acts and actions, thus promoting a false narrative, based totally, or in part, on myths and distortions. Therefore, future generations were led to believe that those who struggled most in society did so because of their personal failures and lack of initiative. But subjugated groups were never completely silenced. For them, the arts have been a site of resistance—from the well-documented rich oral traditions of Native Americans and African Americans to the invention and use of capoeira to hide the prohibited practices of self-defense and engagement in traditional song and dance by Africans on Brazilian slave plantations. In recent years, technological advances have provided the arts and marginalized voices with a global platform in which narratives can be shared, preserved, and refuted at rapid speed, while simultaneously serving as a virtual organizing tool.

During the fall of 2013 UCLA student Sy Stokes, along with fellow students, posted a video titled “The Black Bruins” on YouTube in an effort to highlight

“unacceptable instances of injustice recently [at UCLA]” and to bring awareness to UCLA’s extremely low enrollment, retention, and graduate rates of African American students, while claiming to be a diverse university (Stokes 2013). Within four days of posting the video their message went viral with over 39,000 hits (Mitchell 2013). It could be argued that the success of the video is largely due to the medium Sy used to convey the message. Rather than simply talking about the issues, Sy utilized the art of spoken word poetry to capture the attention of viewers.



Figure 1. Artwork featured on the walls of an open mic venue

Beginning in the mid-to late 20<sup>th</sup> century spoken word, a type of performance poetry began to evolve and become increasingly popular, particularly within the U.S. (Walker and Kuykendall 2005). The terms spoken word and performance poetry are often used interchangeably to refer to original poems that are made to be performed in under three minutes (which is generally the amount of time artists are allotted on stage at open mics and poetry slams), are frequently in the form of free verse with a narrative, are rarely written down or published in book form (with the exception of chapbooks), and overwhelmingly include social commentary. The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought with it a resurgence of the art form—first introduced by The Last Poets in the 1960s. Though not a new phenomenon, Jocson (2011:156) argues that poetry “has (re)emerged as more inclusive than ever, as well as more visibly connected to politics.”

Numerous spoken word cafes nationwide now join the renowned Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City as performance spaces for artists. Low (2006:97) asserts that spoken word broke into the mainstream as media, specifically television, began to popularize the art form stating, “While spoken word had been confined principally to coffee houses and street corners, in the early 90’s it went mass-market and –media as MTV and Much Music began to televise performance poetry, broadcasting clips of poets in-between music videos.” In 2001 HBO launched season one of the series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* also known as *Def Poetry Jam* or *Def Poetry*. The show highlighted popular spoken-word artists across America. The format of the show was a replication of open mic poetry readings with a host, live audience, and performer(s) who took the stage, each attempting to wow the audience. In 2008 the highly successful HBO

series *Russell Simmons Brave New Voices* first aired. The show “captures teenagers picking up the pen and taking hold of the microphone with passion, intelligence, creativity, honesty and power” using their voices to “transcend race, class, gender, orientation, and red state/blue state politics as they show us all what the next generation of leaders looks and sounds like” (Youth Speaks Inc. 2012). Since 2008 the show has featured teenage poets and their mentors from across the nation as they practice to compete in the annual International Youth Poetry Slam, held during the Brave New Voices Festival, where hundreds of teenage artists battle with their teams to come out on top.



Figure 2: Nuyorican Poets Cafe New York, NY





Figure 3: Green Mill Cocktail Lounge Chicago, IL

While open mic poetry readings generally offer support to artists regardless of their linguistic capabilities, slams are competitions individually or with teams that “offer a more critical involvement of the poets and their poetry” and in which “The audience may respond how ever they see fit” (Walker and Kuykendall 2005:231). In his book *A Poetry Slam*, the founder of slam competitions Marc Kelly Smith (2009:36) outlines the

basic rules of a slam engagement: “Perform your own work. Perform in three minutes or less. No props or costumes. Scores range from 0.0 to 10.0 using one decimal place to avoid ties.” He also mentions that while these are the basic rules, they may vary slightly from event to event and judges are usually pulled from the audience.

With such a continued resurgence of spoken word poetry, open mics, and slams one might wonder what draws people to participate in such events. What is it that keeps participants fascinated with this medium of expression? Is it the sheer competition and excitement of slams, the amusing self-divulging and humorous nature of open mics or something deeper? Howard University English professor, activist, poet, and writer Tony Medina points us in the direction of the self; he argues that poetry is about self-definition, the defense of the self, and locating the self in society (through describing one’s environment) (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix-xx).

This dissertation explores the concepts of agency and social structure in relation to the phenomenon of spoken word performance culture. A safe haven for <sup>1</sup>disadvantaged selves, the culture not only embraces the stories of the oppressed, but also pays homage to marginalized identities. Many have argued that the art form serves as a site of resistance for the disadvantaged self, yet the question becomes one of whether a cultural medium—largely dismissed and denigrated by the gatekeepers of society—can effectively address the causes of inequality so frequently referenced by poets. Guided by the overarching question of how and why disadvantaged selves use the arts to define and address inequality and social problems, this dissertation seeks to answer the following

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<sup>1</sup> The term disadvantaged self refers to selves/identities that have traditionally been underrepresented, marginalized, and/or oppressed.

questions: *What themes emerge overall in spoken word performance poetry? What types of public selves are exhibited or described by performers and which social problems/topics are these selves connected to?* While many studies have looked at the role of spoken word as it relates to youth identity development and literacy practices, this study focuses explicitly on adult (age 18+) participants.

## THEORETICAL & CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

### *Guiding Theory: Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic-interactionism is a derivative of American Pragmatism, with its sociological and intellectual legacy rooted in the works of Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer. For Weber ([1930] 1993) the ways in which human ideas mold society was significant, and in comprehending any aspect of a society one must engage in the process of *verstehen* and acquire a deep understanding of the culture from the perspectives of its citizens. Coming from a philosophy of social psychology, Mead's contribution to sociology is often associated with his examination of social experience as the force, which shapes personalities and assists in the creation of the self. Mead is also credited with laying the foundations for the symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer 1962).

However, neither Weber or Mead would utilize the term symbolic interactionism in their lifetime; it was Mead's interpreter and student Blumer who would coin the name for this micro-level theory. In *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Blumer (1962:2) sets out to define "a reasoned statement of the methodological approach" and to

develop his own version of the method. He begins by identifying the basic premises of symbolic interactionism stating:

The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world-physical objects, such as trees or chair; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters." (Blumer 1962:2)

Blumer (1962:3) expands on the first premise stating that human behavior is explained by psychologists through factors such as "stimuli, attitudes, conscious or unconscious motives, various kinds of psychological inputs, perception and cognition, and various features of personal organization," while sociologists look to "factors such as social position, status demands, social roles, cultural prescriptions, norms and values, social pressures, and group affiliation." He argues however, that symbolic interactionism's position "is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right... to bypass the meaning in favor of factors alleged to produce the behavior is seen as a grievous neglect of the role of meaning in the formation of behavior" (Blumer 1962:3). In clarifying the second premise Blumer (1962:4-5) states that symbolic interactionism views meaning:

... as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact.

Blumer (1962:5) then details the process of interpretation mentioned in the third premise:

This process has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning. The making of such indications is an internalized social process in that the actor is interacting with himself. This interaction with himself is something other than an interplay of psychological elements; it is an instance of the person engaging in a process of communication with himself. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action. It is necessary to see that meanings play their part in action through a process of selfinteraction.

It is apparent through Blumer's outline of symbolic interactionism that the theory places great importance on the meanings people place on their everyday interactions and depicts society as the product of these interactions.

### *The Self*

Mead broke from earlier social psychologists that approached individual social experience from a psychological position (Coser 1977). He argues that the self does not exist at birth but is formed through social interaction; he states, "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (Mead [1934] 1967:135). Mead suggests that the language process (exchange of symbols) is necessary for the self to evolve and that only humans attach meaning to words and actions and are able to conceive of people's hidden intentions (Mead [1934]

1967:135). Mead claims that in order for individuals to understand the intentions of another they must be able to experientially get outside themselves, saying, “It is the characteristic of the self as an object to itself that I want to bring out. This characteristic is represented in the word “self,” which is a reflexive, and indicates that which can be both subject and object” (Mead [1934] 1967:136-137). Through imagining ourselves in the place of others we can attempt to view situations as they do:

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved. (Mead [1934] 1967:138)

Again, for Mead, it is through communication (the exchange of significant symbols) that individuals are able to become objects to themselves and gain self-awareness (through the responses of others). Development of self therefore rests upon ones’ learning and ability to take on the role of the other. He uses the term generalized other in reference to “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self” (Mead [1934] 1967:154). Mead ([1934] 1967:154-55) explains:

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process, and to bring that social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms: he must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged; and he must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or

social group itself, as a whole, act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out, or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes its life and of which these projects are specific manifestations... only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed.

Based on Mead's claims, consistency in social life is created through the generalized other- to which people generally mold their behaviors and attitudes:

It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. In abstract thought the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, without reference to its expression in any particular other individuals; and in concrete thought he takes that attitude in so far as it is expressed in the attitudes toward his behavior of those other individuals with whom he is involved in the given social situation or act. (Mead [1934] 1967:155-56)

Mead views the self as consisting of both the "I"—"...the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others;" and the "me,"—"the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes;" therefore "The attitudes of the others constitute the organized "me," and then one reacts toward that as an "I"...the self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases... In the case of the artist the emphasis upon that which is unconventional, that which is not in the structure of the "me," is carried as far, perhaps, as it can be carried. This same emphasis also appears in certain types of conduct, which are impulsive. Impulsive conduct is uncontrolled conduct. The structure of the "me" does not there determine the expression of the "I" (Mead [1934] 1967:175, 178, 209-10). Therefore the self remains in a constant, though often predictable, state of change, with artists—such as poets—being least likely to conform to dominant societal attitudes. Applying Mead's theory one might expect that artists would

be most likely to have a strong self-identity due to high levels of reflexivity and nonconformity.

Anthony Giddens (1991:53-54) speaks to self-identity in the post-traditional order in a similar fashion to which Mead speaks of the formation of self; he states that:

Self-identity, then, is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person's own reflexive understanding of their biography. Self-identity has continuity – that is, it cannot easily be completely changed at will – but that continuity is only a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography... The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual 'supplies' about herself. A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self.

Like Mead, Giddens views reflexivity as immensely important; one cannot maintain a narrative without taking on the role of the other through becoming an object to themselves. While the idea of constructed biographies is a modern notion, which Mead did not speak to, he laid the foundation for sociologists such as Giddens. For Giddens it is not the actual events or behaviors present in ones' biography; it is how the individual interprets those events and is able to convince others to view them in a similar fashion. Gauntlett (2008:108) explains that,

The ability to maintain a satisfactory story, then, is paramount: to believe in oneself, and command the respect of others, we need a strong narrative which can explain everything that has happened and in which, ideally, we play a heroic role. This narrative, whilst usually build upon a set of real events, needs to be creatively and continuously maintained. Pride and self-esteem, Giddens says, are based on 'confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self identity' (1991:66). *Shame*, meanwhile, stems from anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative on which self-identity is based – a fear that one's story isn't really good enough.



James (1948:156) similarly argues that our “Truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them.”

Within spoken word poetry the artists’ narrative reigns supreme. Anything that runs counter to the poets’ truths can be resisted through a process of reclaiming ones’ story—particularly evident in narratives about abuse, abandonment, relationships, and inequity. Therefore, spoken word poetry is a form of impression management.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959: 2 & 6)

contends that:

Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the “true” or “real” attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior... when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have. Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual’s role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression.

Goffman’s (1959) book details the techniques through which individuals attempt to manage the impressions others have of them. He concludes by saying that these techniques are used in everyday life to “expressively sustain a definition of the situation” or in the words of Giddens, a narrative of self-identity (Goffman 1959:255). While Goffman focuses on the techniques we use to influence the impressions others have of us,

Georg Simmel hones in on the perceptual process.

Simmel (1971: 9-11) states that upon coming into contact with someone:

We see the other person generalized, in some measure. This is so, perhaps, because we cannot fully represent to ourselves an individuality which deviates from our own. Any re-creation of a person is determined by one's similarity to him... similarity is by no means the only condition of psychological insight, for dissimilarity, too, seems required in order to gain distance and objectivity...every individual has in himself a core of individuality which cannot be re-created by anybody else whose core differs qualitatively from his own... We cannot know completely the individuality of another... We think of him in terms not only of his singularity but also in terms of a general category... In order to know a man, we see him not in terms of his pure individuality, but carried, lifted up or lowered, by the general type under which we classify him... All of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves. We are outlines not only of the types "man," "good," "bad," and the like but also of the individuality and uniqueness of ourselves. Although this individuality cannot, on principle, be identified by any name, it surrounds our perceptible reality as if traced in ideal lines. It is supplemented by the other's view of us, which results in something that we never are purely and wholly.

Therefore it is a combination of both impression management (by the actor) and perception (by the audience), which determines an actor's ability to sustain a particular narrative, and according to Simmel, prevents ones' "true" self from being known. Within the context of this dissertation it is not necessary that ones' *true* self be revealed, but rather the focus is on the self that is formed through interaction and reflexivity and is publically performed and presented.

#### *Poetry as a social change agent*

William James, C. Wright Mills, and Mead all shed light on the ways in which poetry can serve as a social change agent—James (1948) in his discussion of pragmatism & truth, Mills ([1959] 2000) through his concept of the sociological imagination, and Mead ([1934] 1967) in his focus on moral action.

Artists within spoken word communities, commonly use the phrases “finding my truth” and “speaking my truth.” These phrases connote a belief in multiple truths based upon ones’ experiences and an understanding of truth as an ongoing process rather than an end result. James (1948:147-48 & 160-61) speaks at length on the topic of truth in his essays on pragmatism:

Riding now on the front of this wave of scientific logic Messrs. Schiller and Dewey appear with their pragmatistic account of what truth everywhere signifies. Everywhere, these teachers say, “truth” in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science. It means, they say, nothing but this, *that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally. This is the “instrumental” view of truth taught so successfully at Chicago, the view that truth in our ideas means their power to “work”... pragmatism allows for spoken word’s notion of plural and changing truths... The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events.

If we see poetry as a process of truth finding, we can then apply James (1948) argument that poems serve as short hand or “conceptual short-cuts,” which allow poets to bridge various aspects of their experiences and selves. However, this is not a solitary process.

The significance of spoken word is in its communal aspect- the ongoing sharing that occurs on a regular basis (at open mics, slam competitions and even virtually), which requires an audience. Poetry therefore serves a dual purpose in that just as poets are continuously finding their truth, they are also publicizing it, often with the purposeful intent of altering the beliefs and actions of listeners (as evidenced in spoken words’ close ties to social activism). James (1948:148) explains this process stating:

The observable process which Schiller and Dewy particularly singled out for generalization is the familiar one by which any individual settles into *new opinions*. The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently. This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible.

It could be argued then that spoken word artists, who view poetry as activism, strive to create dissonance in the minds of listeners— that do not share their truth— causing them to question and modify their own truths so that they are in alignment with those of the performer.

Mills' ([1959] 2000) sociological imagination is a regularly invoked concept within the spoken word community. Artists constantly speak to locating oneself and their troubles within the larger societal context, highlighting the broader public issues their personal problems originate from. Many spoken word artists promote a narrative of selflessness through their art, emphasizing their duty to address public issues in an effort to make others socially conscious. Thus, there is often a moral component present within the community usually expressed as the responsibility of individuals to make society a better place. Such action could be defined as moral action, “intelligent, socially directed action in which one acts with the interest of others as well as one’s self in mind” (Mead

[1934] 1967:xxxiii). Mead's student Charles W. Morris clarifies his reading of moral action saying, "The appeal is not from interest to reason, but from isolated interests to the interest in the social system of interests in which one's behavior is implicated" and contends that such moral action is Mead's and pragmatism's ethical theory (Mead [1934] 1967:xxxiii). But how does an artist or individual improve society merely through their words? Morris quoted in Mead ([1934] 1967:xxxi-ii) argues that Mead would explain a poets' ability to create change in terms of impulses:

Mead, in common with all pragmatists since James, held an interest theory of value: that is good which satisfies an interest or impulse... value is the character of an object in its capacity of satisfying an interest... Interests or impulses clash, however, and so arises the problem of the standard of value and the need for evaluation. The aesthetic object brings the emotionally toned impulses into a harmonious whole; the object capable of so stimulating and integrating the impulses has aesthetic character or value... The artist plays upon attitudes, arousing in himself, by the use of his medium, the emotional aspects of an attitude which his work in varying degrees communicates to others by calling out in them his attitude. In so far as this is done, the aesthetic exaltation is the fusion of the "I" and the "me" made possible by the object. Mead believed... that his version of behavioristic psychology gives a fruitful basis for aesthetic theory. Aesthetic value is, as it were, a consummatory gift offered to the self by nature or by the artist; the task of the moral life is to create through reflective effort a similar integration of impulse at the level of interacting selves.

But must moral action be social action? Morris makes the case that Mead is insistent that the motive for action (the moral act) is "the impulse itself as directed to a social end;"

Morris further states:

A social self has social impulses that demand expression as imperatively as any other impulses. For Mead, moral ends are social ends... the self as a social being, must be concerned within and without with a social harmony of impulses. The moral task, it follows, is to be observant of all the values resident in the particular situations of life, and to deal with these values reflectively in the endeavor to allow the maximum satisfaction and expansion-the maximum dynamic harmony of the impulses concerned. (Mead [1934] 1967:xxxii-xxxiii)

It is in this way that spoken word artists, utilizing their poetry as a platform for social justice, seek to conjure up emotions in their audiences that will cause them to act in such a way that will promote social change. Emotionally and politically charged performances, such as Staceyann Chin's (2013) "All Oppression is Connected," are perfect examples of how artists use spoken word to not only stir up emotions in audience members, but to simultaneously create dissonance with a desire for them to stand in solidarity through action.

## **Literature Review**

### **SPOKEN WORD: A CONTESTED ART FORM**

#### *Legitimacy & the Academy*

Over the years spoken word open mics and poetry slams have expanded not just to suburban and rural communities in America, but also onto the international stage. They can be found throughout every continent. On his website Smith (2008) states that, “The Slam has taken root and is flourishing in Germany, UK, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Madagascar, and Singapore... Festivals around the world include slam events in their programs... there are over 500 slams operating around the globe attended by thousands and thousands of people.” Slam and spoken word events and artists can also be found in New South Wales, Canada, South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Greece, Korea, and India to name a few more, though this is not an exhaustive list by any means. At the 2010 Olympic Opening Ceremonies Canadian spoken word poet Shane Koyczan was heard around the world as he performed “We are More,” a poem about his country. Slam poet and author Susan B.A. Somers-Willett says that Koyczan’s performance was “a huge moment” and that “having a poet perform at such a high profile event such as the Olympic opening ceremonies really means that slam poetry and spoken word poetry has come of age... (it announces to the world) there is a place at this global table for poetry” (McGinn 2010). However, with the widespread

recognition of performance poetry also comes the underscoring of debates around its credibility as legitimate art and how it should be utilized.

*Page poets vs. performance poets.*

In an interview with *Speakeasy* magazine, Saul Williams—award-winning pioneer of modern slam/spoken word poetry and international singer, musician, and actor—bluntly stated, “Either the academics can turn up their noses at it, or they can realize it now... This modern-day spoken word movement will evolve literature” (Lindall 2005). Williams’ statement makes reference to the argument by many ‘page poets’ and institutional gatekeepers that performance poetry is of a lesser caliber than traditional poetry and is not only illegitimate art, but also a destruction of it. Stephanie Yap (2008) writes:

... there is the lingering perception that ‘performance poets’ are somehow less credible than ‘page poets’. As American academic Harold Bloom was infamously quoted as saying in the *Paris Review* in 2000: ‘I can’t bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other... This isn’t even silly; it is the death of art.’

Through his statement Bloom, a professor at Yale, exhibits a degree of cultural snobbishness that has been used by publishers and academic institutions to discriminate against particular types of poets. Medina (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix) explains that poets, particularly those of color, using the word (language) to create change are “ghettoized by those in the academy and those at the gates as solely (or simply) oral, urban, or street poets.” Such poets thus are not perceived as legitimate writers. Medina makes the point that while publishers say poetry doesn’t sell, they continue to publish a select group of poets, simply because of the institution they attend or graduated from. He



contends that poets interested in social change and politics (a vast majority of performance poets) are left out and cast as lower caliber writers not because they are, rather because “the critics and canon shapers continue to insist that poetry and politics should not mix” (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix). Poets Pooja Nansi and Marc Nair of Singapore have experienced such criticism by ‘page poets.’ Nansi says:

There are people who feel that if you perform a poem, it is necessarily just pandering to an audience, rather than having any meaning. And that can be true – I mean, there are bad performance poets, just as there are bad page poets. But I don’t think it’s necessarily true that all performance poems don’t have meaning, or all page poems are filled with poignant moments. (Yap 2008)

Nair states, “I have been told by page poets, in not so many words, that slam poetry is not serious enough, not literary enough. I am not sure how or why this perception has arisen, and it is a little sad, when the scene is so small, to divide the scene further” (Yap 2008). In an effort to bridge the gap between performance and page poets, Nansi and Nair along with two other poets each published a collection of their poetry, which was launched at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2007 (Yap 2008). McGinn (2010) says that, “like spoken word, slam, which sees poets verbally sparring on stage, has remained on the cultural fringes since it emerged in the mid-1980s because it has usually been defined by the cringe-inducing performances of amateurs whose work is just that.” However, Koyczan views such amateur performances as the attractiveness of slam saying, “You go to a slam on any given night and there are going to be performances that are a little lackluster. But that’s the beauty of it, because anybody can get up and do it” (McGinn 2010). McGinn (2010) states that Koyczan’s piece performed at the Olympic opening ceremonies “is a meditation on what it means to be Canadian. It was performance poetry

at its best—serious, sly, passionate, playful and lacking the self-righteous pretensions that have often married the form.” Chris Gilpin, director of Vancouver Poetry House, says that performance poetry has “been judged according to the worst it can produce,” and that “spoken word poetry has always had to struggle for acceptance amongst other art forms, and Shane (Koyczan) put it on par with every other art form” (McGinn 2010). However, some performance poets blame other artists, who use performance poetry for entertainment, rather than activism or humanization, as contributing to its struggle for recognition amongst the arts.

*Spoken word poetry vs. slam poetry.*

Some spoken word artists blame slam artists for denigrating the art and causing it to have a negative and/or less credible reputation. This stems from the belief, by certain sectors of the community, that spoken word should be used towards ‘moral’ ends. These individuals tend to see performance poetry as a social movement, which requires it to uphold a particular image, to be taken seriously. For that reason, they view any other use of the art as bringing it down and damaging its status as serious and genuine art. Walker and Kuykendall (2005:232 & 246) argue the significance of performance poetry is that, “...spoken-word poetry, as a movement, is communicating beyond the culture of the poet...Poetry has become a way for the eyes of a new generation to be opened to the troubles of their neighborhood, their country, and their world...together, cultures are learning to communicate effectively in one room.” Effective communication requires listening intently and attempting to understand what is being communicated from the perspective of the speaker. Brandon Spun (2002:1) stresses this notion stating, “The

spoken word is a revolutionary medium, not because of what is said, but because it requires listening. It is about the absolute attention that these voices and ideas demand.” Though neither Walker and Kuykendall nor Spun, who view spoken word as “a movement” and “revolutionary,” state having a particular problem with slam competitions or artists who write poetry for the sake of poetry or entertainment, Medina feels that poetry and poets *should* have a very specific objective.

Medina (2001:xix-xx) defines the primary goal of the poet and poetry as one of humanization, asserting that “...Any poet worth his or her weight in syllables and words uses poetry for certain reasons, be it to define one’s self, to defend one’s self, or to describe one’s environment with accuracy, communicating a clear understanding of what is going on in the world....” He contends that those poets who are truly great are the ones who have a cause, are “relevant, meaningful, and provocative” and care about people and effecting change (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xx). Medina (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix) finds slams in opposition to what he views as the purpose of poetry and its ‘moral’ imperative; he describes slams as pitting “poets against one another in gladiator-like scenarios where they compete for chump change and prestige, judged by a select group of audience members (sometimes consisting of other poets; most times not).” However, while Medina seems to believe poets should be judged by other poets, Australian native Chris Mooney Singh, who is responsible for bringing the poetry slam to Singapore, says that, “poets should meet with a non-poet audience and hold their interest. That’s the challenge of poetry slam” (Anjum 2008). Yet Medina (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix) laments that:

...too often in this arena [slam] poetry is not what matters, but performance-how well one can recite a line or two, no matter how backward or banal. A cat could read the phone book and, if his or her voice hits the right note, their facial expression caught mid-strain in the glare of the spotlight, as if in mid-shit, they just may slam their way to the top of the (dung) heap. Here, poetry is cheap, is cheapened.

Medina (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix) contends that many of the people who consider themselves poets care more about gaining notoriety than poetry. He says those individuals deemed spoken-word artists are usually “serious poets who also happen to perform well on stage,” however they are usually not viewed as accomplished writers by the academy, because those poets “committed to poetry *and* the people find themselves sandwiched between the mindless circus show of slam sluts- heads running around with microphones in they briefcases like pool sharks- and angst-ridden anglophiliacs in MFA-induced comas who confine their poems...” (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xix-xx).

In a letter written and read at the Slam Family meeting held in the Chopin Theatre in Chicago on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2000, which Smith posted to one of his older websites (slampapi.com) in January 2010, he states that the slam itself has fallen victim to “outside entities” trying to use its “reputation and resources” for “self-centered advancement and financial gain without recognition to or support of the Slam Family; or worse, cheapen the reputation of the Slam by associating it with slick, high price competitions or low caliber entertainment/literary gimmicks.” He elaborates saying, “The Slam was never meant to be stuck within the limits of a competition. The original show was a “Variety Show of Poetry Entertainment aimed at assaulting your heart and mind”” (Smith 2000). Thus Smith would most likely argue that it is not the slam that has demeaned poetry, rather those selfish outside entities, which have hijacked it for their own agendas.

For many artists, performance poetry is about both activism and entertainment. Such artists find no conflict in having humorous poems (lacking any distinct message) and social activism/protest poems (detailing social ills with implicit messages) side by side in the same arena. John Walsh founder of North Beach Poetry Nights in Ireland says part of the attraction of slam poetry is that:

it brings poetry alive...quite often there is relevance – the poetry has a topical, political or social relevance – or it’s humorous, and it’s put across in a way that’s lively rather than a deadpan poetry reading. You have people that come in and have no interest in poetry and they think, wow, I didn’t think poetry could be like that. It’s breathing new life into the whole scene.” (O’Halloran 2008)

That was exactly what happened for Vancouver native Chris Gilpin, who thought poetry slams would “be kind of weighty and fondling your chin and thinking deeply about things,” but upon attending his first slam, found that was not the case (Lederman 2008). Now as a slam poet himself, Gilpin uses his poetry in a unique and comedic way, writing about former game-show host Bob Barker, donair kebabs, and snoozing saying, “I write about very specific things that people might not spend a lot of time considering, and I try to make them seem weird and marvelous all over again” (Lederman 2008). Some, who like Medina held strong views of how poetry should be used, have come to feel differently over time and through new experiences. Fed up with the politics of his country and desiring to “explore life on foreign soil” South African writer and spoken word artist Leeto Thale moved to London (Sekete 2008). Thale states that somehow all the problems in his country (South Africa) developed into his poetry, “I could not write about anything else, I was more of a protest poet than anything. I couldn’t see how I could write about a flower” (Sekete 2008). However, Leeto says that his views have expanded considerably

since moving to London. He recalls that prior to leaving Africa he was very mindful of Ken Saro-Wiwa's notion "that you can't write poetry for the sake of poetry," so he "used to be political and emotive," but says that his "subject matter has kind of evolved over the years" and now he "can write poetry for the sake of poetry," saying, "I think that on its own is a revolution. I have learned the way in which people respond to words, something which I didn't give my audience a chance to do before" (Sekete 2008).

*Consensus.*

Performance poetry is gaining ground in academia, as will be discussed in the next section, with courses being taught in colleges and used in middle and high schools to promote academic engagement and literacy. However, debates on its legitimacy between the literary gatekeepers may well persist as purists seek to prevent it from being placed alongside traditional literature. Arguments among performance poets, of how the art form should be utilized, are also likely to continue as the number of performance artists around the world continues to grow—bringing about additional voices to weigh in on these debates. At its worst Smith (2000), Medina (2001), Gilpin (2010), and McGinn (2010) argue that performance poetry can be self-righteous, amateurish, commercialized, and lack purpose beyond entertainment and artists' desire to be famous. However, at its best it can serve as a legitimate form of entertainment, a social movement, and a means of promoting literacy, knowledge, and understanding through the sharing of stories, information, and varying perspectives. Though some artists may never agree with the use of performance poetry purely for entertainment nor within the competitive context of slams, perhaps they can come to respect the purpose it serves for all people in whatever

context they choose to use it; though I suspect this is not likely as long as performance poetry is in a battle with academic elitists for legitimacy and respect.

## SPOKEN WORD, LITERACY & THE SELF

Few would argue with the adage that, “knowledge is power.” Scribner (1988:75) states, that throughout history the ability to read and write has been a powerful device for preserving “the hegemony of elites and dominant classes in certain societies, while laying the basis for increased social and political participation in others” and “in a contemporary framework, expansion of literary skills is often viewed as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world.” Gadsden (1993:352) argues that for African American families literacy and education “are valued and valuable possessions,” which have been “respected, revered, and sought as a means to personal freedom and communal hope.”

In recent years much of the literature on the spoken word has examined the art as it relates to literacy practices, specifically youth literacy in schools. Numerous studies and literature have focused on this topic as it pertains to student disengagement from English/Language Arts curricula in urban middle schools and high schools. In its simplest form literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write. However, a number of the articles have sought to expand this definition to include critical thinking and the ability to use words to rethink and change society (Fisher 2005a; Kinloch 2005). In most cases,

teachers appeared to align themselves and their teaching methods with Paulo Freire's (1988:404) definition of literacy:

To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness... Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables... but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context.

In an effort to engage students and promote literacy, teachers have begun to note the significance of writing the self into education by drawing upon out-of-school literacy activities that students take part in such as spoken word and aspects of Hip-hop (e.g. rap, which involves the writing, memorizing and performing of lyrics). Agger (2007:1-22) claims that it is essential to acknowledge the self in academic writing, as participating in "secret writing"—the erasing of authorship from one's writing in order to portray an objective positivistic stance—is a farce because our writing is bound to be influenced by our experiences, what we believe, and our place within society (e.g. race, gender, class...).

By integrating aspects of spoken word and Hip-hop (and thus the self) into classrooms teachers have sought to "bridge" literate and literary behaviors, which are often unacknowledged inside school settings, with mandated curricula. H. Samy Alim (2011:122) argues that, "...Hip Hop youth practice, in general, reframes notions of correctness and creativity by linking them not to institutionally sanctioned norms but rather to Hip Hop cultural priorities and tastes, inverting Bourdieu's (1984) top-down model of distinction." The innovative classes and programs discussed throughout the articles, demonstrate a strong commitment to what Freire (1989) termed *co-intentional*



*education*. Co-intentional education rejects the banking model of schooling—where students are viewed as bank accounts that teachers deposit knowledge into—in lieu of liberating teaching (problem-posing education), which actively engages students in critical thinking and problem solving. In this context it is recognized that education must entail a dialogue between teachers, texts, and students. Therefore, students create their sense of self through dialogue, reflection, and action. In this framework the goal of education is to produce individuals who are able to critically assess the structure of society and their place within it.

The literature on spoken word and literacy presents four key sources of student disengagement from English/Language Arts curricula: 1) students' perceived lack of curricula relevance, 2) the use of Eurocentric curricula, 3) teachers' lack of understanding regarding cultural contexts and student backgrounds, and 4) the limiting of self-expression and language in assignments.

In "Writing for Their Lives: The Non-School Literacy of California's Urban African American Youth" the authors found that many of the youth in their study were "unmotivated to engage in school-based literacy events because they do not see the relevance of the school curriculum to their lives or, based on prior experiences, they actually fear having to write in school" (Mahiri and Sablo 1996:164). However, the authors comment that though students in the study often voiced displeasure and annoyance with writing in school the "same students clearly valued the out-of-school writing of their peers... Thus, it is erroneous to conclude that writing, in and of itself, was unimportant or "uncool" to these students; rather, they resisted what they viewed as the

unauthentic nature of many of their experiences with academic writing” (Mahiri and Sablo 1996:174). The authors point to the personal nature of students’ voluntary out-of-school writing as a possible reason for their resistance to academic writing. They found that students who engaged in voluntary out-of-school literacy practices, frequently used their writing to “make sense of both their lives and social worlds” and to provide “them with a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their everyday experiences;” therefore, they were met with resistance from some students who refrained from showing them their work—saying it was too personal to share—or would select only certain pieces they would allow them to view (Mahiri and Sablo 1996:168 & 174).

Korina Jocson (2005:135 & 2006:701) argues that the *type* of literature often present in American classrooms may also contribute to writing apathy. She describes the prevailing literature curricula as “elitist” and the creations of “dead white men [and women];” consequently, some minority students find that the texts and poetry they are taught to value do not reflect their own lives—nor do they accurately reflect the lives of the vast majority of whites in our society. This can lead youth to think their cultures, ideas, and beliefs are not of importance within the larger society and certainly not inside the realm of education. If students feel at odds with curricula they do not see themselves present in and assessments that are culturally biased, they may choose to distance themselves, resulting in academic apathy. Sampson and Garrison-Wade’s (2011:302) findings support Jocson’s (2005 & 2006) argument showing that there is a preference for culturally relevant school lessons by African American students because such lessons “most relate to them and their lives.”

Another source of youth disengagement lies in complicated relationships between teachers and students of differing backgrounds. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002:88) problematize the high enrollments of “ethnic minority children” with few “ethnic minority teachers,” arguing that as “classrooms across the country become increasingly diverse, determining how to connect in significant ways across multiple lines of difference may be the greatest challenge facing teachers today.” Milner IV (2011:88) suggests that white teachers can effectively educate ethnic minority students by developing congruence with their students through the acquisition of cultural knowledge about them while concurrently deepening their own knowledge and understanding of self. Blachowicz and Wimet (1995:335) argue that teacher education programs should “include the methods and perspective of cultural anthropology... habits of observation, interviewing, discussing, and participating in the lives of students [which] encourages teachers in training to make more context-sensitive decisions about instruction.” However, based off of her findings on silencing in schools Fine (1992:123) found that teachers often do not engage in such practices because:

For educators to examine the very conditions that contribute to social class, racial, ethnic and gender stratification in the United States, when they are relatively privileged by class usually and race often, seemed to introduce fantasies of danger, a pedagogy that would threaten, rather than protect, teacher control. Such conversations would problematize what seem like “natural” social distinctions, potentially eroding teachers’ authority.

Camangian (2008:38) suggests that even when teachers are interested in developing “culturally empowering instruction,” professional development opportunities and the time necessary to alter curricula are sacrificed due to an administrative focus on addressing behavioral problems. Stovall (2006:79) makes mention of the additional

difficulty of having visual and performing arts viewed as essential to curricula rather than extra-curricular—as they are currently viewed by many school districts.

In “Poetry, Literacy, and Creativity: Fostering Effective Learning Strategies in an Urban Classroom” Kinloch (2005) discusses the detriment of ignoring the meaningful and animated writing capabilities of students by limiting their self-expression to standard academic writing and values. She argues that in such settings students can become frustrated—feeling that their styles of writing and ideas are not appreciated nor respected—and become introverted and disconnected from assignments. Kinloch (2005:102-103) claims that by allowing English as a second language students to write in their “Mother Tongue,” they are able to “make sense of the world in the language they know” and access “particular communicative exchanges” and “switchable codes” that “establish a sense of belonging, reinforce lived experiences, and allow students to appreciate linguistic variances.”

It is out of the aforementioned points and sources of academic detachment that teachers began to search for meaningful ways to gain the attention of their students. Taking note of youths’ (often extensive) engagements with literacy enhancing activities outside of school, educators started to look for methods of bridging out-of-school literacy practices with school literacy practices. This often resulted in supplementation of the curriculum or extracurricular programs, with mediums and styles that were of interest to students (e.g. free verse spoken word poetry, rap lyrics, and Hip-hop culture).

One way in which educators have sought to redefine literacy and combat youth disengagement is through extracurricular literacy courses and programs, which

integrate and utilize youths' engagements with literacy outside of the classroom. Maisha Fisher (2005a:117) defines such programs as "Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs) or "chosen" literacy spaces," which, "provide a forum grounded in the philosophy that "everyone has something important to say" while fostering a culture of listening." She also argues in her earlier work (Fisher 2003) that PLCs "are considered educational institutions by their participants" (Fisher 2005a:117). Fisher contends that one of the most important features in the success of before and after school literacy programs is that they are *chosen spaces*. In "From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts," she describes two extracurricular writing communities in New York public high schools, the "Power Writers" and "Runaway Slaves of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" where "literacy is strategic, purposeful, and always linked to meaning" (Fisher 2005a:116). Fisher (2005a:116) argues that, "Teachers, in a very serious way, work to liberate language and prepare students to be in control of words; they do this by allowing students to be co-constructors of their learning community." This aim is often accomplished by having students both share their work and constructively critique the work of their classmates. Joe, the teacher of the Power Writers, utilized a strategy he called "read and feed" in which students share an original piece of work and receive feedback from a minimum of two to three classmates as well as an instructor.

In addition to extracurricular programs, some educators have sought to deal with youth disengagement by supplementing curricula as well as integrating students' out-of-school literacy practices into them. Taking notice that students in their urban

California English high school classrooms were greatly influenced by Hip-hop music, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) decided to integrate it into their classrooms through a poetry unit. To provide students with a “lens with which to examine other literary works and also to encourage the students to reevaluate the manner in which they view elements of their popular culture,” the teachers placed Hip-hop music as a post-industrial art form alongside other eras and poems (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002:90). The students were given a group presentation assignment in which a canonical poem and Hip-hop text were to be analyzed making connections between the two. The students also had to come up with interpretations of each text that took into account the time period during which they were composed. In this way students learned to view art as a product and expression of its time. Students also composed “anthologies” of ten poems that required them to utilize specific poetry forms such as ballads, sonnets, and elegies and to write about social/political problems, love, death, a familiar place, an aspect of life they celebrate, as well as two topics in forms of their choice. The authors found that by allowing students to use their own experiences and worldviews to compose the anthologies, they saw how their lives connected to schoolwork.

Another strategy for engaging meaningful student interactions is described by Valerie Kinloch in “Poetry, Literacy, and Creativity: Fostering Effective Learning Strategies in an Urban Classroom.” Kinloch (2005:98) argues that *democratic engagements* defined as “the classroom exchanges in which students express their feelings and ideas through oral and written mediums,” can serve to promote literacy. She claims that through such democratic exchanges, students become aware of differences

and are required to engage multiple opposing and intricate discourses through discussion and critique. Utilizing this strategy in workshops she held with sixth grade students, she gave them assignments such as writing about their own relationship to writing in the format, style, and language of their choice. Through such open-ended writing topics, students began to feel that their knowledge, cultures, and opinions were valued and eagerly participated. In their writing, students shared and discussed their own experiences and identities while tackling emotional issues and fears (e.g., terror and war). Kinloch (2005:107) asserts that “if the function of democracy in education is to communicate human experiences in terms of freedom, association, and liberty, than my students and I were using creative pedagogical strategies and sophisticated performance moves in the classroom to educate one another.”

Teachers and researchers often defined success as students’ involvement in extracurricular writing programs, increased participation in the classroom, and the ability to make parallels between canonical and popular culture content. Fisher (2005a) found in many of her interviews with students that they mentioned their involvement in extracurricular writing programs as motivation for attending school. She argues that such spaces go beyond providing literacy learning and “are socializing units to help students build a greater autonomy in school and out-of-school contexts” (Fisher 2005a:127). She buttresses her claim with examples from Joe’s Power Writing class, of students’ continued attendance after graduating, use of the class as a support system for college preparation, as well as, one student’s choice to stay on campus for the after school program, though she did not have a required class during the last period of the school

day. Kinoch (2005) describes students in her workshops who began as quiet and shy turning into active and excited participants. Through democratic engagements they began taking ownership and pride in their writing. One girl in particular, who had previously remained silent in her classes, began not only to write frequently, but to also share her work. The student's increased confidence in presenting her ideas spilled over into other classes where she also began volunteering to read her work. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002:91) found that "students were not only engaged and able to use this expertise and positionality as subjects of the post-industrial world to make powerful connections to canonical texts, they were also able to have fun learning about a culture and genre of music with which they had great familiarity."

Relationship building, based on respect through recognition and understanding of students' use of language, was a significant contributing factor in increased student participation. Fisher (2005a:129) claims that literacy in writing communities is contingent upon "relationships between peers and adults with mutual admiration and respect," which assist in revealing "words, styles, and trajectories" to students that they can "access while building their own literate identities." She discusses how Joe connects to and encourages his Power Writer students in the following excerpt:

At this stage in Dee's development as a writer, Joe was less concerned with issues of grammar and profanity in her work because he wanted to call attention to the fact that she was finally beginning to "sing." With that foundation, he began to build a relationship based on respect and honor with Dee and the other students present. (Fisher 2005a:123)

By accepting where students were at and their style(s) of language, Joe was acknowledging and legitimating the ways in which students communicated in their



everyday lives and thus their experiences and forms of expression. Joe had the following to say regarding language:

Language is a very lush gumbo. American English is a gumbo. And if we interpret gumbo as a very exotic and spicy stew with ingredients from the entire possibility it had then we have to accept that... there is an English that is quote unquote standard which allows information to be transmitted but that does not deny the fact that there is information being transmitted all the time in other Englishes. (Fisher 2005a:123)

Instead of rejecting the “Englishes” of his students, Joe used their language to draw comparisons with and teach “standard” English. Fisher (2005a:128) notes the importance of Joe’s methods saying, “While acknowledging the literacies students engage in everyday outside of school, these writing communities also provide opportunities for students to learn and master the “standard” while understanding the standard does not belong to any one class or ethnic group, but in fact, belongs to them as well.”

Kinloch (2005:111-12) contends that writing *must* incorporate the choices and voices of students and that “We, conscious educators, should invest in their economy of expressive writing, multiple identities, and emerging literacies and knowledges if we are to learn from them as they learn from us.” Fisher (2005a:128) asserts that for youth in the Power Writers and Runaway Slaves of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, “reading publicly not only exposed students to other writers and poets, but it also showed them how they were part of a larger network of wordsmiths.” The commitment and engagement of the teachers with the subjects they taught reinforced the importance of such a network to students; many educators were avid writers and readers outside of school and would share their own work with students (Fisher 2005a, Kinloch 2005). Such exchanges also provided unique opportunities for intergenerational perspectives to be shared and gained between

students and teachers. Morrel and Duncan-Andrade's students also benefited from the intergenerational perspectives they gained by comparing and contrasting canonical and post modern texts.

It is Kinloch (2005) who appears to most fully outline a specific method for combating youth disengagement and the promotion of literacy inside classrooms. Kinloch (2005:107) specifies the following components as essential in developing critical intelligences during her workshops with middle school students:

1. Agreeing to be listeners, thinkers, readers, and writers;
2. Embracing the idea that we are all writers participating in a learning process;
3. Working in small, focused writing/reading groups before convening as a large group;
4. Respecting the thought processes of others by taking notes and offering critical responses;
5. Drawing on prior knowledge and home practices to interrogate the usefulness of creative writing and standardized, or "academic," writing;
6. Reading and responding to poems, essays, short stories, and commentaries of current events;
7. Volunteering to be lead experts on a particular literary theme or concept;
8. Refusing to have identities and writing styles defined in limiting categories that do not celebrate language and the democratic orchestration of multiple voices.

She argues that it was through these practices that they learned to expand and share thoughts in a space, which "supported the walk, talk, and literate acts of each of us" (Kinloch 2005:108). Similarly, Jocson (2011:159) claims that, "As a medium of expression, poetry can be one means for moving educators a step closer to improving educational practices and, ultimately, can accelerate literacy achievement for traditionally underserved students" by allowing "...youth to take part more fully in their own learning process."

At the core of successful extracurricular programs there was a well-thought-out design strategy. Fisher (2005a:128) attributes some of the success of the Power Writers and Runaway Slaves of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to the “open mic format rooted in community-based spoken word venues.” In this sense educators, much like open mic hosts, guide their “audience” (students) and set the “stage” (classroom) by laying ground rules and creating an impartial atmosphere. Respect being central to most open mic venues, was also an integral part of successful writing groups within schools. While observing open mic poetry communities in California, Fisher (2003:370) noted that, ““Respect” or “Respect the mic” was a warning to poets to avoid unnecessary vulgarity and for the audience to listen attentively.” Respect played out in much the same way inside classrooms “...where students were encouraged to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude toward their peers” (Fisher 2005a:128). By adopting formats and rules students were familiar with outside of school, teachers were able to create areas of neutrality in which youth felt secure, inside classroom settings.

Future research is needed in order to generalize many of the authors’ findings given that all of the studies were conducted in “urban” environments. Regardless of the atmosphere Fisher (2005a) warns that educators must be careful not to diminish cultures, such as Hip-hop, to nothing more than literacy devices. She states that:

...there is still a need to examine how out-of-school literacy practices such as spoken word poetry and “hip hop pedagogy” can be viewed as more than tools teachers and students use in classroom contexts... The enduring question for English/Language Arts teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers then is how to critically examine these participatory literacy communities or alternative/supplementary learning spaces, especially if we see them as a culture more than a strategy. (Fisher 2005a:117)

Alim (2011:138) shares Fisher's concern stating, "...there is a widespread tendency for Hip Hop pedagogies to sanitize Hip Hop for inclusion in schools" and that "Many scholars, as pointed out in Low (2011), self-select Hip Hop texts, or only allow students to bring in texts that are morally in line with progressive, middle class, or even bourgeois politics and sensibilities." He argues that this is "widely different from an approach that begins with texts that youth, their peers, families, and community members are listening to and creating themselves and runs the risk of being outright rejected as boring, ancient, or confusing..." (Alim 2011:138). Alim (2011:138) suggests that "...instead, Hip Hop pedagogies could develop a broader, more nuanced understanding of Hip Hop that moves from sociological and political interpretations that privilege socially and politically "conscious music," and consider Perry's (2004) theorizing of Hip Hop as a rare, democratic space where the sacred sits right alongside the profane, allowing for "open discourse" and prioritizing expression over "the monitoring of the acceptable" (pp. 5-6)." He claims that by exploring the Hip Hop texts that "students make use of in their "lived experiences"...the pitfall of reproducing dominant ideologies in marginalized clothing" will be avoided (Alim 2011:138).

Fine (1992) argues that simply getting the educational structure to incorporate the voices of students into mandated curricula may perhaps be the most difficult task to accomplish as silencing serves a specific purpose. It "removes any documentation that all is not well with the workings of the U.S. economy, race and gender relations, and public schooling as the route to class mobility" (Fine 1992:116-117). She further claims that within the context of public schools, silencing practices"

1. Preserve the ideology of equal opportunity and access while obscuring the unequal distribution of resources and outcomes
2. Create within a system of severe asymmetric power relations the impression of democracy and collaboration among “peers” (e.g. between white, middle-income school administrators and low-income black and Hispanic parents or guardians)
3. Quiet student voice of difference and dissent so that such voices when they burst forth, are rendered deviant and dangerous
4. Remove from public discourse the tensions between (a) promises of mobility and the material *realities* of students lives; (b) explicit claims to democracy and implicit reinforcement of power asymmetries; (c) schools as an ostensibly *public* sphere and the pollution wrought on them by *private* interests; and (d) the dominant language of equal educational opportunity versus the undeniable evidence of failure as a majority experience for low-income adolescents. (Fine 1992:116)

## CULTURAL TIES

Ties to African and African American cultures through oral and literate traditions are also areas in which spoken word literature has focused. In “Manifestations of Nommo in Def Poetry,” Felicia Walker and Viece Kuykendall (2005) argue that elements of nommo, a characteristic of African orature, are effective in the poems featured on the HBO television series Def Poetry Jam. They state that, “Through Def Poetry, the artists’ purpose is to make others aware of what is functional in their world or the world of others whose perspective possibly would not have been heard otherwise. To call it to being is how the concept of nommo is used” (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:239). The elements of nommo examined by the authors include: rhythm “how well a speaker regulates his or her flow of words with correct pauses and intensifications,” soundin’ out “a speaker’s creative manipulation of volume and musical quality in the delivery of the message,” repetition “the repeating of a phrase or words for intensification with the justification that the more a phrase is repeated, the more an audience becomes involved,”

call and response “the interaction of the speaker with the audience,” and mythication “language suggesting that the message is sanctioned by some suprarational force to demonstrate the righteousness of the cause” (Asante 1987 & Walker & Kuykendall 2005:238). Findings suggested that rhythm aided in capturing and maintaining audience attention. Soundin’ out was frequently invoked within Def Poetry, most often exhibited through braggadocio, “which involves bragging about self and the material possessions... these possessions may be tangible or intangible” (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:240). The authors found that Def artists, primarily African Americans Def poets, bragged about their ability to care for their children well, their sexual experiences, and owning specific cars. They authors state:

Braggadocio is relevant because of the history of braggadocio in African American orality, from the beginnings of storytelling and folklore and later to rap music. African Americans identify with braggadocio, and, aside from the Asian poet, Beau Sia, African American Def poets used it more often than poets of other ethnic origin. (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:241)

Walker & Kuykendall (2005) found repetition most often occurred when artists spoke about social, love, and/or money issues. The authors discovered that repetition allowed the audience to identify with the poets’ situation, illustrated and emphasized points, and served as an attention grabber. With regard to call and response they noted the interactive nature of performance poetry stating:

Poets enter into Def Poetry expecting audience interaction and response. Any poet with any poem can be interrupted with sounds of “hmp” or “alright.” Laughter, applause, and standing ovations during the poem are appropriate and welcomed by the poet. The poems are delivered expecting interruptions after speaking certain words or lines. (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:242)

Thus, call and response was found to be quite common amongst the artists in various

forms. Mythification is noted in two of the Def Poets poems.

While not specifically one of the five elements examined, the authors maintain that themes of identity are often present in the works of Def poets. They also assert that when on stage, artists turned into individuals who “stood for a cause, had a sense of humor, or wanted to open the minds of others” and that how the artists told their stories was of utmost significance (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:245). Walker and Kuykendall (2005) conclude by stating that not all of the elements are present in the same poem, however it is not rare that more than one element be found in a single poem. They also make clear that while the five elements of *nommo* do appear in Def Poetry and Def Poets, they most consistently appear with the African American poets, however the elements are common within the works of poets of other ethnicities and cultures.

*In “Open Mics and Open Minds: Spoken Word Poetry in African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities”* Maisha Fisher (2003) examines the revival of spoken word and poetry venues and their salience as places for literacy practice and cultural identity development within the black community. She defines them as African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities (ADPLCs). Her ethnographic study describes two open mic settings which she says “recall the feeling and communal centrality of jazz clubs and literary circles of the Harlem Renaissance” (Fisher 2003:362). She argues that the ADPLCs are mainly supported and created by people of African ancestry who are active participants in literacy-based events that take place outside of work and school situations. Of particular interest in Fisher’s study are the cultural practices, which lie beneath the organization and arrangement of the open mic events as

well as the inspirations and motivations of participants.

Fisher found that members of the two ADPLCs blended oral and written traditions rather than choosing between forms of literacies. Fisher (2003:384) noted this “blending of oral and written traditions” in the work they produced. For example, two of the poets created a book titled *Summo Nommo: Words from the Ghetto/Ancestral Wisdom of Poetry and Prose*, which she argued was a robust illustration of the balance between the written and spoken word. She defines nommo as “a West African concept” that “refers to the sacred word or the magic power of the word” and like Walker and Kuykendall finds that it is currently used regularly amongst African American poets and writers (Fisher 2003:384-85). Fisher (2003:386) contends that the literacy practices in the ADPLCs she observed were “inextricably linked to a process of education that involves personal identity, affiliation with a local community, and an awareness of a global community...” and that spoken word venues in ADPLCs “...have become sites of teaching, learning, community-building, and networking,” as well as “forums where people can contribute their viewpoints, disseminate information that is useful to the Black community, and discuss local, national, and global issues.” She emphasizes the importance of each and every individual participating at events; venue owners, organizers, writers/expressionists, and members of the audience all took part in the open mic experience. Therefore each person had the chance to teach, making learning a circular as well as multigenerational thing. She concludes by stating that community members of ADPLCs are:

...committed to establishing a Black cultural literacy or knowledge base where the legacies of Black leaders, writers, and artists are preserved. In spoken word



poetry open mic events, people of African descent have a space where they are not limited to generalizations and stereotypes that have negatively impacted their self-image, as well as the images other people have imposed on them. In these spaces their possibilities of identity are abundant. Finally, in ADPLCs, people of African descent have the opportunity to learn about one another's lives globally and educate each other about their differences and similarities while forging new relationships. These alternative knowledge spaces have returned to the value systems described by Holt (1990) in his reexamination of education in some traditional West African communities where literacy learning and education provided people with "a sense of one's place in that history" and one's "purpose." (Fisher 2003:387)

### *Rewarded Identities & Selves*

In "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity" Susan B. A. Somers-Willett (2005) examines the ways in which perceived authenticity of marginalized identity is viewed as part of the criteria necessary to be a successful slam poet. She specifically explores the "political ramifications and possibilities of this phenomenon" when it takes place between African American slam poets and audiences who are predominately white and middle-class. Her study found that the majority of slam poetry is composed in first person utilizing a narrative style; she argues that due to the first-person narrative mode of many slam poems, audiences are encouraged "to perceive the performance as a confessional moment, one of the most defining characteristics of slam poetry is a poet's performance of identity and identity politics" (Somers-Willett 2005:52). The theme of authenticity emerged as part of the criteria upon which these narrative ridden slam poems are evaluated against. Somers-Willett (2005:54 & 56) contends that when employed to describe identity, "authenticity":

...is often meant to suggest instances in which subjectivity and identity are generated beyond or without cultural constraints. That is, one's "authentic self" is original, unique, true, existing before and outside of discourse. For a performance

of an identity poem to be deemed authentic is to assume there is an original or essential self which one perfectly emulates in performance... Challenging this concept of the authentic self, theorists have recently argued for understanding the self as a social and cultural construction, i.e., as the product of discourse. For all intents and purposes, identity in this framework is best thought of as a fluid product of both conscious and unconscious performances... With this view in mind, we must treat the authentic also as a social practice, as something which has no original beyond its own repetition and acceptance over time...

Somers-Willett found that what she deemed as marginalized identities (class, gender, race, and sexual) were actually viewed as the most authentic by slam audiences. Thus, these identities were rewarded when performed. Therefore she contends that:

...poetry slams can *generate* the very identities which poets and audiences expect to hear. As authenticating practices, the systems of reward established by slams embody complex systems of desire and power. Poetry slams are themselves generative sites of social practice from which these identities are performatively cited, recapitulated, and questioned. They prove sites of negotiation between poet and audience where the performance of an identity is judged for its success or failure (its authenticity or inauthenticity) in the world. Such judgments about identity happen every day as one performs his or her identity in any given social situation; the unique aspect of the poetry slam is that identity is judged openly and publicly through competitive scoring. (Somers-Willett 2005:56-57)

Somers-Willett determined that the marginalized identity most commonly rewarded at poetry slams (at the national level) was black identity and that the majority of attention surrounding the art of slam has been on its African American performers. She states:

...the mainstream media has often focused solely on the genre's ties to the traditionally black artform of hip-hop. Other recent medial projects, such as the feature-length film *Slam* and the current HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, have presented slam poets to mainstream audiences alongside hip-hop artists and against the backdrop of black urban culture. (Somers-Willett 2005:58)

Somers-Willett speculates that the success of black identity poems in the slam world, in instances where audiences are predominately white and middle-class, may be a way "of showing support for antiracist attitudes, confirming a white audience's own positions as

liberal, rebellious, hip and against the status quo” (Somers-Willett 2005:59). She elaborates saying:

Rewarding such writing and performance can benefit a white liberal audience: reward displaces them from being the target of the black poet’s protest. That is, in appreciating the work of African American poets who proclaim racial identity, audience members might assuage the “white guilt” associated with such an expression. This is not to say that black slam poets are rewarded solely to assuage white guilt. Such art may in part be appreciated and rewarded for the cultural positions of power that it confirms and denies, or it may serve as an affirmation of the need for cultural redress. Rewarding these poets also helps proclaim a slam audience’s liberal political identity: to support black voices and black identities is to try to distance oneself, effectually or ineffectually, from other whites who hold racist attitudes. (Somers-Willett 2005:63)

She also mentions white culture’s historical “fascination with black artists and black expression” which dates back to slavery (Somers-Willett 2005:64).

Nederveen Pieterse (1992:136-37) points out that outside of being a slave or servant, the first role African Americans were allowed to perform in white society was that of being an entertainer (which had also been a duty of slaves) and after emancipation many African Americans headed to northern cities where they found that they were quite limited in the fields of employment open to them, with entertainment and music being the exception. Pieterse (1992:141 & 148) argues that this should come as no surprise because entertainment is a type of service; he states that:

Entertainers do not threaten the status quo but embellish it. Emotive, ‘feminine’ expression by blacks is permitted, conforms to the rhythm myth, the stereotype of musicality. Over the past century or so, and especially since the 1920s, blacks have become the musicians, dancers and buffoons of Atlantic culture, just as gypsies with violins occupy a similar niche- romanticized and marginalized- in central Europe. Also most images of blacks which prevail now in everyday western society are images of entertainers. The imagery of the popular media in which entertainment provides the sole positive role-models for black youth, and social reality in which entertainment and sport are gilded doors out of the ghetto, together form a vicious circle of stereotyping. Even so, the entertainment ghetto

on the margins of Atlantic culture has at times also been refashioned into an avenue of protest, and the song and dance into a vehicle of emancipation...Bebop and cool jazz became the music of existentialists and beatniks, part of the abstract soundscape of the postwar world of United States hegemony, but also the soundscape of a culture in which protest and collective action form part of the normal social pattern...

Thus, for African Americans, the arts have served several purposes. Through the arts culture is transmitted, income can be earned, and liberation can be gained through uniting in protest and social action. However, for whites, African American performances have served a bit of a different function.

The arts provide a way for groups to learn about each other, to peer into one another's lives without necessarily coming into direct contact. While African Americans were intimately aware of what went on in the lives of whites, this was not so in reverse. Thus it could be argued, that for whites, observing the culture of African Americans through the arts may have served (and continues to serve) a bit of a voyeuristic function. Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992:139) and Neil Leonard (1962:49) claim that the upper-class became interested in subcultures, such as Jazz, as they "lost faith in traditional standards" (due to things such as the Red Scare—the time period following World War I marked by a fear of communism in America brought on by the Bolshevik Revolution— and the Red Summer—a term used to describe the summer and fall of 1919 when race riots broke out in American cities) and "sought exposure to the values of the subcultures which seemed to offer fun, excitement, romance, a more genuine contact with reality, and identification with art." Nederveen Pieterse (1992:139 & 140) further argues that *prohibition* served to increase socialization between a portion of the elite and those in the social margins and that it was not uncommon for elite whites to go 'slumming' in Harlem.

While none of the literature focuses specifically on the presentation of artists' social selves and their ties to social activism, though Somers-Willet's article comes closest by focusing on identities, much of it does touch on these topics and shed light on the overarching themes in and uses of spoken word. The elements of encouragement and support for fellow artists, creative uses of language, delivery of strategic messages through ones' work, identity construction and performances, sharing of intergenerational perspectives, a commitment to being socially conscious (e.g. aware of current events both locally and worldwide, possessing a critical understanding of history, being well-read), ties to African and African American cultures, and writing the self out of trouble (e.g. writing as a form of self help or escape from the difficulties one is facing) discussed in the articles are all present in the larger spoken word community. Additionally, it highlights some of the ongoing tensions within spoken word communities and between spoken word artists and the academy, which provides the framework necessary for more fully understanding spoken word communities and artists.

## **Methods**

Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser developed the grounded theory approach in the early 1960s. The objective of this style of qualitative analysis is to allow theory to emerge from the data, "...without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests..." (Strauss 1987:5). It is through the systematic collecting, coding, and memoing of data that theory and often research questions are generated. The grounded theory method rests upon the argument that at a variety of stages of generalization, theory is necessary for deep-seated understanding of social occurrences (Strauss 1987). Strauss and Glaser (1987:6) contend that this type of theory should be formed in close association with data, "with researchers fully aware of themselves as instruments for developing that grounded theory." Both American Pragmatism (particularly John Dewey, but also Charles Pierce and George H. Mead) and the University of Chicago Sociology tradition (from the 1920s until the mid-1950s) contributed to the advancement of the grounded theory approach (Strauss 1987). Specifically it was American Pragmatism's focus on action in problematic situations, as well as, its consideration of method within the framework of problem solving along with the Chicago School's extensive utilization of in-depth interviews and field observations as data-collecting methods, which influenced Glaser and Strauss in their creation of the grounded theory style of analysis (Strauss 1987). Strauss (1987) states that both traditions

believed change to be a continuous aspect of social life, but felt its particular directions must be accounted for; social interaction and processes were their focal points. He also notes that almost from its beginning Chicago Sociology “emphasized the necessity for grasping the actors’ viewpoints for understanding interaction, process, and social change” (Strauss 1987:6). Within my own work these same commitments were made, through utilization of the grounded theory method in conjunction with symbolic-interactionist theory, in order to understand artists’ perspectives and the ways in which their social selves are linked to larger social issues.

Criteria for inclusion in the study was based on the age of individuals, the requirements included being 18 years of age or older and participation in a spoken word community as performers at public events in the Washington metropolitan area—sometimes referred to by locals as the DMV (The District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia) or even just “the area” (pronounced “errea” with an emphasis on the first syllable). Ethnographic methods were used to gather data through snowball sampling. Using grounded theory, open coding was done to generate themes and finalize research questions. Focused coding was then employed to answer the research questions. There were no direct benefits to participants. Data were collected in the Washington metropolitan area during 2009, 2013, and 2014 using the following methods: 21 participant observations of open mics, one year of participant observation teaching a spoken word course at a university, three participant observations of two professional spoken word artists at special events, 10 in-depth interviews, two diary entries, 23 student reflections, attendance at a multiple day poetry festival in D.C. and 25 videos from the

internet of poets performing at venues in the Washington metropolitan area. Greater emphasis was placed on participant observations, which allowed examination of the self/selves, themes, and social concerns artists portrayed and voiced in public performances. During interviews, artists may list the selves, themes, social concerns they write about, yet what they actually depict and express in *public* performances may be very different. This study is primarily concerned with what individuals of the spoken word community publically express.

## PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In order to break into a local spoken word community you often need to find just one event to attend, as future poetry events will be promoted. This was exactly the case when I began my research. The first event I heard about, upon moving to the Washington metropolitan area, was at a venue called Political Poets. Political Poets is a unique community gathering space founded by an artist/activist/restaurateur. It is multifaceted with each location featuring a restaurant— catering to all dietary needs and preferences obtaining ingredients from small family farms who treat their animals humanely, a bookstore—featuring an array of books by local authors that address social issues as well as diverse selections of books for children and youth, and art—by local, national and international artists reflecting Political Poets’ mission to inspire change and spark transformation in the local communities and world. Additionally, Political Poets hosts ongoing book talks, community discussions, special events, and poetry programs. While Political Poets certainly succeeds in bringing together diverse communities it



should be noted that the majority of audience members and performers at the open mics I attended phenotypically appeared to be African American.

When I attended my first open mic at Political Poets I was informed of numerous poetry events and in a short period of time became acquainted with local artists. Another way in which I learned about open mic nights and poetry events, particularly at universities, was through my college affiliations as a graduate student, student affairs professional, and facilitator for a spoken word poetry course. Factors that determined which events I observed mainly included: cost, transportation, my availability, and connections with hosts and performers. Efforts were made to attend poetry events at all of the Political Poets locations, which I succeeded in with the exception of one location whose event was sold out by the time I arrived and two locations that opened after the conclusion of my data collection. My participation within the local spoken word community included: maintaining relationships with other artists, attending a poetry festival, participating in spoken word workshops, facilitating a college level course on spoken word and social justice, and hosting, performing at, and attending open mics.



**Figure 4. Political Poets**

During participant observations, depending on which method was less intrusive in the setting, I took detailed notes in my poetry and school notebooks and/or utilized a mini audio recorder. During interviews the audio recorder was primarily used, eliminating the need for detailed notes, thus allowing for a more natural and conversational setting. The participant observations of open mics included nine hosted by Political Poets, nine hosted

by two colleges, one hosted by a social/political awareness organization, one at Poetology and one at a community center. The participant observations of the two professional spoken word artists' included one performance and one Q & A session by Amarina who was in her thirties and identified as bi-racial, an activist, and lesbian and one workshop, which included performances hosted by Lyrical Empress who identified as black and was also in her thirties.

## INTERVIEWS

When I began attending open mics at Political Poets I became acquainted with JBT who would become instrumental in my journey into the local arts and activism scene. JBT, a well-known spoken word artist and slam poet, works with youth arts and activism programs in local middle and high schools and coaches D.C. youth slam teams (and has also been part of the adult D.C. slam team). Our paths have continued to cross over the last five plus years through our work as artists and educators in the DMV area and we are currently working together to prepare students from my spoken word course to serve as youth slam coaches at local high schools. Upon first meeting JBT I made him aware of my research and he was willing to assist. Through JBT I was introduced to an 18-year-old African American artist and student, Rob, whom I had seen perform at an open mic (he would later go on to mentor and coach local youth slam teams). One day while we were eating lunch at a local cafe, a lively conversation about spoken word erupted. Realizing it was a perfect opportunity to gather data, I asked Rob if I could tape record our conversation. Aware of my research project, he agreed and an informal interview took place. Due to the spontaneity of the interview a protocol was not

available; thus the discussion primarily led the interview, which meant the omission of some research questions.



Figure 5. Rob

Around this time I was asked to host an open mic event at a university where one of the poets, Sergio, caught my attention. Sergio was a 19-year-old student majoring in Government and International Politics and racially identified as white. The tone of Sergio's interview was similar to Rob's; it was relaxed, much like a conversation, with us often laughing and nodding in understanding or agreement. Questions were purposely asked in an order, which fell in line with his answers making for a seamless social encounter void of any awkward or silent moments and special attention was paid to the way questions were framed, so as not to lead the interviewee. Like the prior and preceding interviews it was tape-recorded; however the face sheet (Appendix A) and interview protocol (Appendix B) I used were later changed for all preceding interviews (Appendices C & D) to include alternate and additional questions that arose from initial findings.



**Figure 6. Sergio**

A few years later, after returning from teaching in Alabama, I was looking to reconnect with the poetry scene and continue my research. I reacquainted myself by attending a New Year's Eve open mic at Political Poets where I spoke with the host of the evening who put me in touch with most of my additional interviewees—a continued testament to the community atmosphere of the DMV arts scene. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, depending on what was most convenient for the interviewee, including: Starbucks, my office at work (some of the interviewees were students at the university where I'm employed), from home via Skype, and various Political Poets locations. I would come to find that almost all of the interviewees were connected to Political Poets as hosts and/or performers. Many of them were also coaches and mentors for D.C. youth arts programming.

### *Interviewees*

Afram a 36-year-old male, who identified his cultural affiliation as Afro American and racial group as black, is the director of poetry events at Political Poets as well as a host and performer attending spoken word events weekly. He is a native of the DMV area and described his occupation as an artist, edutainer, and creative concierge. Guy is a 25-year-old male, who identified his cultural and racial affiliations as Cameroonian, black/African-American, is also a regular host and performer at Political Poets and friend of Afram who says he attends spoken word events “too many faaaacKing Times!!!” He grew up between Cameroon, D.C., and Maryland where he



currently resides and defined his occupation as Educator, Indie Artist, and Youth Programs Coordinator with a special interest in violence and abuse trauma work and youth advocacy.



**Figure 7. Guy**

JBT, 29-years-old, cited his cultural affiliations as Jewish, American, Hip-Hop, and activist and his racial affiliation as White Ashkenazi Jew. JBT hosts the youth open

mic programs at Political Poets and works together with Guy as a Youth Programs Coordinator. He was born and raised in Maryland and currently resides in Washington, D.C. where he attends spoken word events daily.



**Figure 8. JBT & fellow poet**

Lexie is a 26-year-old female that described her cultural affiliation as Dominican/Latina. She grew up in New York City, but currently resides in Washington,



D.C. and is a graduate student and teaching artist who attends spoken word events several times a month. Lexie participates in poetry slams and coaches youth slam artists along with many of the other hosts from Political Poets. Jessica, a native of the Washington metropolitan area, is a 30 year-old female describing her cultural affiliation as Jewish and racial group as white. Her current occupation is in nonprofit development and fundraising and she attends spoken word events 1-2 times per week. Jessica is the founder and slam master of a local poetry slam and hosts open mics at Political Poets. Jane identifies as a progressive white female who is 51 years of age. Originally from Chicago she resides in Washington D.C. and is a writer and organizer who attends spoken word events weekly. She is not only a host at Political Poets, but also the director of a local multiday poetry festival that brings poets from across the nation together every two years. She is also responsible for procuring grant funds to run the programs Guy and JBT work for, which has allowed JBT to make a full time living doing the work he loves. Keith is a 32-year-old male from the D.C. area who identified his cultural affiliation as African American and race as black. He is currently an educator and attends spoken word events 1-2 times per month. Keith and I became acquainted through a mutual colleague and have worked together as educators. He performs at local events and put me in contact with Guy and reacquainted me with JBT after we had lost contact.



**Figure 9. Keith facilitating a college workshop**

The final interviewee Lisa was introduced to me by one of my students. She is a 21-year-old college student from Maryland who identified her cultural affiliation as southern, mid-Atlantic, American, Christian, and woman and her racial group as American, mixed race, unknown. She was probably self admittedly the least integrated

into the local poetry community, though she is often asked to perform at college events by her peers.



**Figure 10: Lisa with a group of fellow college poets after an open mic**

## DIARY ENTRIES & STUDENT REFLECTIONS

The diary entries were composed by aDSp, a 22-year-old male, who racially identified as black and was majoring in marketing. ADSp and I met at a poetry workshop in 2008 and worked together in an artistic organization during the spring of 2009. During

this time we developed an artistic trust, sharing our writing and providing feedback to one another. In composing diary entries he was instructed to write about anything relating to his writings and music. For the first diary entry I gave him suggestions of ideas such as writing about why he writes or doesn't write at certain times and what he writes about and why. For the second entry I asked him to detail how he chooses pieces to perform and why, as well as, where he chooses to perform. I was struck by the high rate of self-disclosure in his entries.

Student reflections were collected from eight of my students (seven undergraduate and one graduate) taking a spoken word poetry course in the fall of 2014. At the end of the semester I asked students if they would like to participate in my research, which would entail allowing me to use their reflection papers and poems in my data. They were informed that their identity would be kept anonymous and participation would have no impact on their grades. Consent forms were made available to the entire class and I told them to complete and submit one only if they were interested—this way should a student not want to participate they would not be singled out. All of the students decided to participate with the exception of one, who left the university prior to the end of the semester. Students were assigned three papers throughout the semester, which ask them to reflect on: 1) the first few weeks of the class, 2) each of the practicums they performed at, and 3) the semester as a whole. It is important to note that students were only graded on the completion of their assignments in hopes that they would feel free to be candid. Similar to aDSp, the rates of self-disclosure in the reflections were very high, which likely had to do with the trust that was built by spending a semester together.

## RECORDED PERFORMANCES

Given the array of poetry events and venues in the Washington metropolitan area it would have been extremely difficult and financially draining to consistently attend weekly events at even just a few of the most popular spots. Therefore, I spent the majority of my participant observations at Political Poets, which is undoubtedly one of the most frequented and well-known venues with multiple locations and numerous general and community specific (ASL, LGBTQ, Youth...) open mics every night of the week. In order to capture data from the larger community and additional events and venues, I viewed and transcribed random samples of online videos. I began by using Research Randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous 2014) to generate three sets of five numbers (from 1-50 to find videos from the most recent years). I then assigned one set of five numbers to each of the three search engines I chose (Google, Bing and Yahoo) and searched the phrase “spoken word Washington D.C.” (this phrase was chosen as it generated the best variety of videos that fit the criteria for this study) and selected the video numbers that corresponded with the five randomly generated numbers assigned to each search engine. I repeated this process weekly for a month discarding duplicate videos, videos from events prior to 2009, videos that were taken of events outside the Washington metropolitan area, and videos that were not of spoken word/poetry performances resulting in a total of 25 videos.

## PERSONAL TIES TO THE COMMUNITY

I feel it is essential, in seeking to align myself with humanist practices that I provide a sketch of my background, which undoubtedly affects the way in which I

perceive and analyze information. I am a 30 year-old female who identifies as biracial, multiethnic, a first generation college graduate, poetic sociologist/artistic educator and first American-born citizen on one side of my family. I grew up in Washington State and completed my Associate's Degree in northern Seattle, where I was first introduced to spoken word poetry, before coming to the East Coast. For the past 10 years I have lived in, worked at and/or attended colleges in southeastern & northern Virginia, Washington D.C., Maryland, Alabama, and Louisiana with the majority of my time spent in the Washington metropolitan area. My participation in spoken word communities spans Washington, Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia and includes: putting on and hosting/MC'ing open mics, being published in multiple college literary journals and a poetry anthology, and facilitating a creative writing class at a prison and a spoken word and social justice course at a university.

With my background embedded in the community I was observing, data collection was sometimes difficult as I sought to manage my roles as an observer, educator, and artist. The greatest ethical issue I dealt with was in observing artists and writing about them. I found this to be complicated because some were not aware of my research and I had conversations with them as an artist or educator. Even though the events and conversations took place in the company of other people, I began to question if I should use my field notes without their knowledge. On some level I felt a sense of disloyalty as an artist/educator and worried that I might misinterpret something they said or paint them in an unfavorable light or that they might simply feel betrayed if they were to read my writing. As a fellow poet I would never want to offend another's work; within

the spoken word community respect is of great importance as are networks with other artists who often assist one another in various capacities. Therefore I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all individuals, organizations, locations, and any other identifying information—with the exception of photographed venues in other states that were not used as observation sites. All interviewees were asked to sign consent forms and indicate whether or not they agreed to be audio taped. Individuals shown in non-group or non-event photos gave express written consent for the photos to be taken and used in my research. Finally, it is imperative to note that this study does not include nor examine poetry slams and cannot be generalized to all spoken word communities.

## Findings

### PUBLIC SELVES

#### *The Passionate Self*



Figure 11. Rob exhibiting the Passionate Self



The process of writing inherently provides artists with a space to reflect on their varied and intersecting identities/selves because of the reflexivity it demands. In many instances Mead's dialogue between the "I" and "me" is quite visible in spoken word whether or not a poet intends for it to be. Though poets may not consciously think about it, their choice of poem topics, narrative construction, and decision of which pieces to publically share are forms of impression management that reinforce the identities/selves central to the version of their biography they wish to maintain. As I moved between open and axial coding five categories of public selves became evident: the Passionate Self, The Survivor/Helper Self, the Reformer/Activist Self, the Challenger Self, and the Humorous Self. As the most commonly displayed public self, the Passionate Self explored emotionally charged situations and circumstances. Poems about love, sexuality, heartbreak, violence, hatred, vulnerability, anger, sadness, and fantasy were associated with the Passionate Self. Romantic relationships were the main topic addressed by the Passionate Self. The following is an excerpt from a poem performed by a young woman in which the Passionate Self is quite apparent. In the poem she describes her desires and fantasy of being involved with a friend of hers she likes who is a police officer:

Excuse me Mr. Police officer, I hate to bother, but I need to turn myself in. I'm thinking of doing criminal things so I need to be handcuffed, patted down, booked in and written down, roughed up or roughed down because what I wanna do is considered premeditated... what I'm planning is calculated down to my red pumps in the kitchen whipping up your favorite dish... covering up my soon to be indecent exposure, tonight I'm breaking all laws, I've got concealed weapons, it's hidden but I'm not really good at hiding things, so I'm sure you'll find them. I'll make it up though 'cuz in the end I'm'a rob you of all your inhibitions, steal all your fantasies and turn them into reality... try to swallow all my deep morals...

take the time to matriculate slow and I know that this is a bit much to take in... yeah you with that blue collar, I want you to read me my rights and give me directions to follow and when I don't I need for you to turn me around in one swift move with my hands tied my hands behind my back, yeah I like that freaky stuff... I can't wait to be handcuffed...

### *The Survivor/Helper Self*



**Figure 12. Post Hurricane Katrina in the 9th ward of New Orleans**

The Survivor/Helper Self often discussed enduring difficulties and tragedies and/or their desire to help others experiencing certain situations. The Survivor/Helper Self spoke about death, murder, rape, molestation, violence, natural disasters, and diseases. In “Somebody Prayed For Me,” a young woman spoke about being displaced and surviving Hurricane Katrina saying:

Somebody had to have prayed for me because I denied Katrina would ever be. Tearing down power lines making me think back in time. Of Emmett Till's face... as Katrina began, causing death to the Gulf Coast like foreign weapons of mass destruction. Somebody had to have prayed for me because I had been partying the night before. Age 19 thinking back once more, about life so far in New Orleans. Saving my last dance for next week's party, not noticing Katrina would displace me- away from home without food, shelter, or clothes. This could not be a part of my life. To wake up on the road feeling from a storm; I watch babies moan. Traffic crowd New Orleans interstates. I witnessed a man's face shattered in glass from his car hitting the back of an 18 wheeler. So, I know someone had to have prayed for my soul. Feeling from Katrina made me motherless, fatherless, without siblings. If you ever want to know how it feels to be displaced, come find me, and I'll tell my story of going without. For, I was once a New Orleans resident, a Black college student making use of the power of independence. Now, I am labeled a refugee. Regardless of my journey through seven or more states; I am still labeled by an ee. Yet, somebody must have prayed for me. I am alive.



**Figure 13. Poem in 9th ward of New Orleans**



**Figure 14. Mural in Louisiana neighborhood**

The Reformer/Activist Self took on multiple forms including that of an educator, crusader, and advocate, in connection to social reform and/or societal change as a whole. They often invoked their own life experiences. The Reformer/Activist Self spoke about war, child soldiers, HIV/AIDS, slavery, racism and colorism, police brutality, gentrification, abstinence, teenage pregnancy, natural disasters, joblessness, murder, politics, feminism, and black on black violence. In “Count With Me,” a young woman protested a variety of social ills through a narrative about protecting her ten-year-old brother from them:

Every now and then I have to remind my little brother to count with me. He is only ten and yet he can carry the weight of the world...He is indeed my protector, my home and my strength. But every now and then I have to remind my little brother to count with me. Before he begins to fantasize over guns and drugs. Before he lets his mind become raped by girls and thugs. I say come here my little brother and count with me. Before he watches 50 and Yayo make the hood

alright- With Britney Spears jingles- I'll say count with me. And sometimes his heart is heavy, he misses his older brother 'cause it is hard to hear him count through 10-inch glass put up by the warden. Hard to hear his voice tremble over his lips, when he writes his numbers in a letter. And he only sees his big brother write those numbers about once a month. Because his brother has no job, no income, no education and in jail rent is a dollar a day. When he gets sad, upset or afraid he comes to me and I hear him say, Tisha come count with me. When teachers say he can't keep up in a class of 20 students and move him into a class of 35, he says count with me. In his later years, when he sees his friends up against a wall with flashlights in their eyes, reads about classmates found under staircases, old girlfriends dumped in alleys or dumped by men who saw their love begin to take life and shape inside of their bellies, he says count with me. He will say count with him as tears roll down my face as I pack a bag for him. I won't see him for awhile, I am sending him away Because I won't let my brother die in a war they say is being fought for a cause that don't mean shit to us. So three days passed and they waited, three days passed and they were hungry, three days passed before we started moving. And one by one, two by two, and three by three, they Died –four WHAT? So, no they won't replace my brother with a flag. 'Cause at the Superdome an old lady wrapped the flag around her shoulders to help keep warm-and right about now that's all it's good for. So keep your Flag.



### *The Challenger Self*



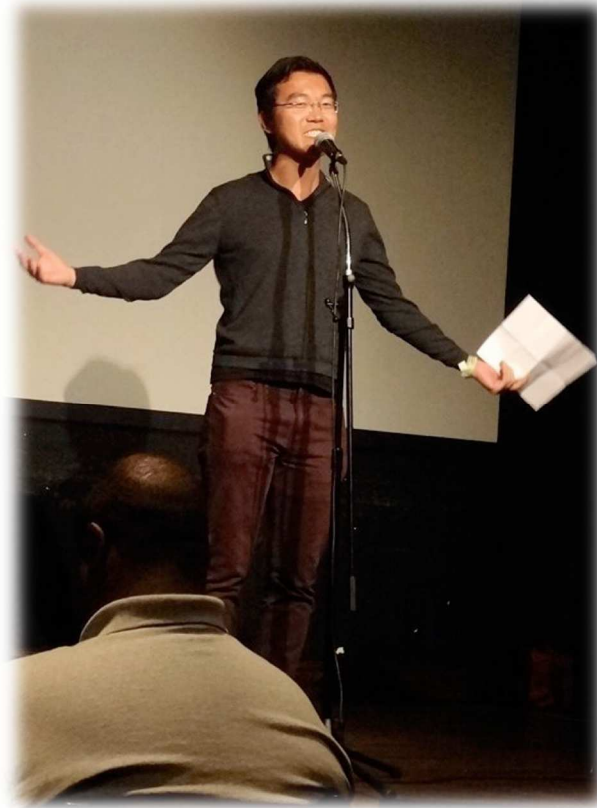
**Figure 15. Performer at college open mic**

The Challenger Self, though similar to the Reformer/Activist Self, tended to more specifically challenge and/or protest a particular norm, ideal, behavior, or condition (whereas the Reformer/Activist Self often cited a laundry list of societal ills within a singular poem). The Challenger Self also came off at times as a martyr, savior, or hero

stating that *they* had come to bring about change or save, however not all Challenger Selves came off this way. Challenger Selves spoke to topics and issues such as: homelessness, stereotypes of black women, feminism, promiscuity, natural disasters, the beating and murder of Chicago teen Derrion Albert, emotional pain inflicted on women by men, slavery, the invisibility of Asian voices in America, personal responsibility, and emasculation. A young man named Zane used one of his poems to challenge the notion that men, specifically black men, are not suppose to show emotion or cry when they are angry or hurt:

We men get heated, but we can't cry. That's why there's so much water and hate boiling inside. It evaporates making the dark clouds in front of our eyes how can we reach for the stars—we can't even see the skies? Ya'll need to see me cry tonight... you walked back right into it; you weren't compatible, but you just had to go through it, now let me trace back- searching for another possibly because you never got the attention from your mother... going in and out the womb of many women in hopes that a soul will consume a broken man who's afraid of loneliness... he just needed a shoulder on which to cry. Ya'll need to see me cry tonight. 'Cuz as soon as a brother goes sensitive here comes the others with the negative synonyms, "you bitch ass nigga with your bitch ass cryin'" —I'd rather let it all out than find myself dying—drowning on held back tears of frustration... of me and my fathers relations—knowin' that I probably wouldn't recognize his face if he was one of the folks makin' drinks up in this place. Or I go along and act like everything's cool—when you start to act suspicious we say "nah, it's all good." It's all good is just a cover up for how bad it is, so when your homeboy says it, think of how sad he is. Before you brush it off or paint it with a new lie, think about the situation and don't be afraid to cry because we men get heated, but we can't cry—that's why there's so much water and hate boiling inside. It evaporates making a dark cloud in front of our eyes how can we reach for the stars if we can't even see the skies? I mean brothers are still holding their breath—waiting to exhale, hiding our true feelings—for the definition of being male means being a man means being strong at all times... So why would a guy cry—sticks and stones hurt you but words are a different story. Physical can cause pain but the mental gets real raw—words last longer...

## *The Humorous Self*



**Figure 16. Poet exhibiting the humorous self**

The Humorous Self addressed topics in a purposely joking, playful, witty, facetious, or amusing manner often performing works in the formats of parodies, similes, or haikus. The Humorous Self poked fun at stereotypes of poets and talked about food, heartbreak, romance, sexuality, age, and money. D'Andre was by far one of the most amusing and humorous artists, which perhaps is why he hosts a very popular open mic. After another artist requested he perform a certain poem he introduced the poem by



saying:

I was just talking to a Korean Stripper who called herself China Vagina (audience bursts out laughing) literally, no, no bullshit! Seriously! And we were just talking about life and I asked her where she wanted to go... and I prefaced it by saying 'don't say New York,' 'cuz I asked one of my students where she wanted to go in life and she said New York- I was like that's it!? (audience laughs) Fuck! Underachiever! (audience still laughing). But anyway she said Brazil and I said 'I've been' and so this is about the 'I've been' (some audience members still laughing).

D'Andre then performed the piece both talking/rapping and singing about being a heartbreaker all his life and meeting his match in Brazil:

... up in Mysteria Lane looking for the next desperate housewife (audience is laughing)... I need to settle down, syke I'm a damn liar, I'm not your family guy. I'm more like the quagmire, giggity thickety (inaudible- audience starts laughing then D' Andre starts laughing and stops to say 'I'm sorry, I like that line. It's one of my favorite lines' the audience is still laughing). I'm not your family guy I'm more like your quagmire giggity giggity quick to slip up in your thickety... she didn't speak much English, but like Babyface we had a way of talkin' better than words. Five- seven with heavenly curves... I left my boys to their own devices, politic with the chicks, she never quoted a price... the woman looked like Kim Kardashian—I wanted to do the Ray J with her ass (audience bursts out laughing at his reference to the Ray J and Kim Kardashian sex tape). She sat me down on the couch and poured two patrone shots, in a minute or two she slipped out of her swimsuit... she saddled me, straddled me, road me like a camel b, handled me with passion and heat and left me fast asleep. Woke up and my ass was short, no wallet, no phone, no camera (audience starts laughing), no passport (audience still laughing)...

## THEMES

Despite already being immersed in spoken word poetry, in order to accurately generate themes, I had to withhold my assumptions about why poets engage in the art form in order to understand the culture from the perspectives of other artists. While coding performances I looked for confirmation of preliminary themes in the interviews,

diary entries, and reflection papers. During the initial stages of the project there was actually little focus on social activism, which came to be one of the largest themes and guiding research questions. Poet after poet invoked Mills' ([1959] 2000) sociological imagination—identifying and describing the larger structural framework in which the highlighted social problems and their individual troubles stemmed from while directly or indirectly calling for change. The most frequently referenced social problems included: racism, poverty (lack of access to resources, gentrification, failing educational systems), violence (specifically black on black violence and police brutality), strained familial and romantic relationships, sexism, homophobia, mental illness, and international conflict. That data revealed four overarching themes that explain why poets participate in spoken word performance culture: 1) to write the self out of trouble, 2) to create, maintain, and modify ones' self-identity through reflexive practice, 3) to build and sustain a sense of community, and 4) to use poetry as a platform for activism.

### *Writing the Self Out of Trouble*

“Writing is better than breaking windows,” says spoken word artist Lyrical Empress. While we sit in the audience captivated by this woman with a booming voice and vivacious personality she tells us, perhaps facetiously, that if she didn't write poetry she'd probably “be a murderer or in jail.” Lyrical Empress writes through things, “poetry has always been my way,” she says. “When [Hurricane] Katrina happened I wrote a poem for myself to deal with it, not for everyone—poetry got me through... As a poet you search for the truth—you want to know why.” Like Lyrical Empress, many of the

artists in the study mentioned the use of poetry as a means of working through troubles and/or to gain clarity. When asked what inspired her to write poetry Lexie replied:

Um, I think it's the overwhelming feeling of being unable to process something. So when I feel like I don't have the answer- to a problem um, I have to write through it. And so, sometimes it's just, you know sometimes it comes from more extrinsic- no one's talking about this thing and I I feel like I need to address it. Um, but more often than not, I think it's- I don't know how to deal with this or I'm not sure how to approach this...

Lisa and Jane responded similarly stating:

Um, for me it's- I guess it's therapy. It's a place I get to put anything down and so, when I feel overwhelmed whether in my personal life or by something- I see out in the world I can put it on paper... it really is a way for me to really process what I'm experiencing.

... I write the-the reason that most other people write is 'cuz we don't have a choice because the um, the obsession – um, is sort of pounding up inside us. And it's the-the obsession for self-expression um, but often it's um because I'm-worked up about something. I feel passionately about something and I don't- or I'm passionately confused about something and I don't know what to do about that and I don't know how to understand it. Um, and so I look for- and so I write and I look for language that will help make sense of it or that will help at least-give shape to it even if it- the resolut- even if there's no resolution.

In a reflection paper one student explained that for him “writing is like a way... to rehash things in my head... and sort things out, so it was always kind of a tool for me.” JBT had the following to say:

...I think mainly the reason people do it [share personal information in poetry] is for the-the therapy that-that exists within doing that and the *process* of um being vulnerable on stage. It helps us deal with our problems- it helps us recognize reality and-and and try to move forward um and-and I think overall it's beneficial. For as difficult as it is, and sometime people break down crying and whatnot, uh in the long run I think it's beneficial in terms of coming to terms with how you actually feel about something and then finding solutions moving forward...

As indicated in the words of these poets, writing can be therapeutic—a form of catharsis.

It can allow one to release raw emotions and channel feelings such as anger, rage,

sadness, fear, betrayal, pain, and despair through a constructive and socially acceptable medium. The emotional nature of poems written by artists working through problems caused the Passionate Self to be displayed often.

One of the most violent poems was performed by a young woman about ending a relationship, in which she was fed up with being mistreated and lied to, by killing the other individual. She introduced her poem saying, “I can get pretty violent:”

I’ll be ready with my gun in my hand, meet me at the door. No! You can’t come in—hell no! Don’t you speak, just give me the pleasure of watching you bleed. No! No! No! Don’t you say a word, I have heard all your sentences all your creative lies I’ve seen the shit come out your mouth I’ve been your toilet, your trash bag. I’ve seen your acting—you rehearsed with me a number of times... Don’t you run, I wanna see you converse with my gun! Common! Tell it all your lies. What? Now that I’ve got metal in my hands you’re afraid of me? Do it! Give me reason to let you leave, to allow you to be free—to be FREE. Because even after I kill you and I WILL kill you... I will now be.

Though it is not possible to know without asking, perhaps the author has learned to deal with her rage by writing, which is more socially acceptable and productive than committing acts of violence. Regardless of if the poem is telling an actual story, indicating what she wishes she could do, or a symbolic representation of ending an abusive relationship she is still in, it serves as an outlet and means for her to work through a difficult situation. Though not as dramatic, numerous spoken word artists used their writing to work through their feelings regarding failed romantic relationships. Zane spoke about being frustrated with love:

... I have a way of coming across a lot of wrong ladies who instead of kissing me and caring they would rather play me. Instead of giving me their heart they would rather give me rabies... I’m giving up on relationships until I turn eighty—period... ‘cuz I never know where to start, so I’m gonna start with the heart. So the hell with ever acknowledging or recognizing true love... there will be issues of baggage from past relations—don’t you know I have problems too boo. I’m not

your savior. But over time things change and I might meet someone—not the same bitter damsel, but the right sweet one and I don't wanna have baggage, so I'll leave it with the bellhop 'cuz this elevator of relationships has come to a glass top. 'Cuz for the healing process to ever begin this "fear Zane" phase must come to an end. But I never know where to start, guess I might as well start with the heart.

Michelle expressed the pain of an ended relationship:

Missing you has become a full time occupation. With no leave or vacation, I get no sick days or holidays with pay. I make a living of living in the thoughts of your absence. And I'm lacking sleep and concentration unable to focus on fruitful moments that don't include you, so accustomed to you occupying moments of my mind that there are no longer empty spaces. But emptiness lingers in different hiding places like- your finger tips that use to speak whispers across my skin... that I miss you is an understatement...

Eleena used poetry to deal with the pain and her feelings of betrayal regarding a recent situation in which someone she was romantically involved with ended things and took legal action to keep her from contacting him. She prefaced her poem by saying, "Last week I had to go to court um, and I got a, a temporary peace order put on me..." She then detailed her experience:

Waiting for a judge to decide if I'm ultimately crazy—just like two weeks ago I was talkin' to baby as he clinged onto my breasts—I threatened to kill him... I confess, but it was a joke... flashback... I can remember when I use to let him down my throat I almost choked on those memories. He called it love last week, I guess his feelings just be changing,' he use to call me queen as he unbuttoned my jeans now says he wants me to stay away. Today I learned what true betrayal is. Tryin' to let shit go when my mind keeps speakin,' tears seepin' off'a this page feelin' caged... before court mama says life goes on, but reality is tough—you gotta grow tougher skin—he was ugly anyways, forget him... the not knowin' insecurities growin' I ask, but I know I'll never get answers. My mind allows me to flashback. I wonder if he remembers those late nights legs spread in the backseat of his car... protected not by latex, but by the stars—I guess my need to be in love would take me far and I'm risking my life and I know this shit ain't right, but he left a permanent stain, not just on my vagina but on my brain. Asking me if I'm sane so I say goodbye insanity.

Jesse wrote to release the anger she still held onto regarding a prior relationship:

It's basically about my ex boyfriend- I still wanna punch him in the face... but I'm working on forgiving... I don't wanna be your call girl when you want some. I don't wanna be your playgirl when you need some. I don't wanna be your showgirl when you wanna watch some. I don't wanna be your rebound girl when you had some. I don't wanna be your apologetic girl when you messed up some- 'cuz it was a lot and you know it pisses me off! I don't wanna be your clean up girl when you've messed up some. I don't wanna be your dope girl when you fiend some or your baby girl when you need some. I don't wanna be YOUR girl- 'cuz you don't need me. I wanna be SELFISH 'cuz I deserve some.

D'Andre's poem was about losing a close friendship with a woman he felt was his soul-mate due to another man coming into her life. He began by saying:

I've wasted a lot of love ya'll, you dig? 'Cuz that's a poet's curse you know—we gotta live the shit so we can talk about it, so ya'll won't have to go through it—so this is about the last one that got away... the last of the Mohicans... the last of the girls who I still got along with she called me at my job called me damn near crying talking about she 'bout to move in with this dude—she don't know what that'll mean for our relationship 'cuz we real cool and everything like that and he's jealous of me even though he never met me just 'cuz of the things she'd say about me. And that's not the first time I've heard that but I hope it's the last time I heard that...

D'Andre then proceeded to perform his poem:

This is the poem where I say everything's gonna be alright. The first lie I've told you in nine lifetimes. Why? 'cuz cats be fakin'. This is the part where I get to wonder whether your phone call was an invitation to your rescue party. Is this the part where I Larenz Tate give chase to find Nia Long... no, no this is past the commercial break so welcome to passive aggressive progressive heartbroke insurance where we're such bloody fuckin' nice guys that we'll tell you exactly what our competition is sellin' even if it reveals that they are in fact the better bargain. Is this the part where I bow out gracefully... where I once was her plus one now the doorman unceremoniously hands me a warm wet towel upon entry and just asks that I not mess up the glass... how dare they take back what was never mine, but then how could they not because—this is the part. This is not, I repeat this is not the part where I Darius take you Nina to be my unlawfully wedded quote unquote urgent as a mutherfucker, mutherfucker—this ain't a movie—I don't have you at hello, I have you at goodbye—if at all. In fact goodbye is too good for what this is because real goodbyes at least allow for the sweetness of nostalgia. Goodbye is you went to the Peace Corps, or the Marine Corps or heaven's door. No you—you went... to Brooklyn—with him. And I love Brooklyn, no I like Brooklyn... we LOVED Brooklyn. We made love to

Brooklyn... This is the conversation where I make shit easier to digest for someone who's not even the one eating—for someone who's not even in my view, but definitely in the picture... Let's not act like someone with a Y chromosome will not ask why so and so is over. You always liked my puns, well here's one "what did the jealous boyfriend say to his girlfriend's soul mate?" give up? WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE SPOONING? So I'm alone to catch the L to see you—I'll just catch the L—let's not fake like this isn't the apocalypse of our (inaudible) Sundays at Tom's Diner... what's YouTube without you because the H-E loses the A-R-T when the H-E-A-R-T is broken in two. This is the part where the one that got away revs up a getaway car... This is our last Brooklyn sunrise—you did in fact admit that we had a gift for finishing each others sentences... well this is the part where you get to finish this—I love...

Here D'Andre used his poem to express the thoughts and feelings he wanted to communicate to his friend, but felt he could not in order to allow her to move on and make her own decisions. While he does not state whether or not he showed this poem to the woman he wrote it about, one artist did. In one of his diary entries artist aDSp wrote, "Some of the best things that I have written/created was when I was drowning deep in the water." Later in the same entry he expanded saying:

I was going through a difficult time with someone I care about. We were going through a hard time in our relationship. We were not talking and mutually considering cutting each other off permanently. That's the first time I can say that I wrote in a long time. It was a long verse/poem reflecting on our situation. I sent it to her in an attempt that it would mend some of the damage done.

In this situation aDSp's writing became a communication tool. He used it not only to work through his emotions, but also to convey things he hadn't been able to say directly to his romantic partner. Perhaps one of the most touching and memorable performances I witnessed was a young woman sharing her story about a relationship that she felt had left her damaged:

... um, this is a part of me, a damaged part of me from 2013, so I'mma leave this damaged part of me on the stage tonight (clapping). Um, I was in a relationship and uh this is the way I felt: it could all be just a dream... don't tell my secrets

allow yourself to be my diary... I'm here waiting for you every night... no phone call, but I'm here birthing your son... every song that I hear reminds me of you sometimes instead of cryin' I laugh and while I'm rocking my baby to sleep I say King-that's my son... you don't have low self esteem and just because you're black doesn't mean that you are a killer or a murderer or you are that man on the street that's gonna steal somebody's purse... don't just stand for anything-just because they have rumors of what your father may be or what I may be you are your own person. Don't mind my black eyes or the tears that I may cry at night...this is the damaged me. The hurt me-the crying for my mommy at night me. That little girl that doesn't have a father in her home at night girl. I'm damaged. I'm hurt. I try to put on these heels and makeup to make it seem like I'm more taller than what I be, but really I'm hurt...

For this poet the performance itself appeared to be the most cathartic, serving as a way for her to release “the damaged part of herself” in order to move forward.

While the majority of artists, who used their poems to write through struggles, addressed romantic relationships, not all did. At one open mic a young woman used her poetry to talk about family struggles including the death of her father. Through her writing she spoke about becoming emotionless and turning to drinking and partying and at one point began to cry on stage. Given that she had brought her entire family to watch her performance, it seemed that writing and publically speaking through her trials and emotions served as a form of not only self-help and empowerment, but as an explanation to her family as to why she had acted out. Another poet vented his frustration with being ostracized due to his weight. His poem confronted individuals who signal their disapproval of his weight in public (through stares, snickers, and comments) and defined their behavior as problematic rather than the eating habits of those who do not fit into socially acceptable weight categories:

STOP! Turn your head! STOP STARING AT WHAT MAKES ME  
DISREGARDED AND sooo remarkable all at the same time. Don't keep your



eyes locked on what makes me more memorable... OFF! All looks of disapproval. I know none of you, yet I know all of you. I first saw you in the hallway-the day I overheard grandma telling ma “he HAS to stop eating.” I thought I had been bad. Then I saw you on the field during gym class- when all my friends were METERS ahead of me on the track. I could never keep up with the group, but when I caught your glances mixed with smirks, staring at my stomach- snickering at any exertion of movement. It hit me like coke. It made my eyes open wide- to the reasons you decide to keep your sights fixated on me. I’m a big guy. I’m large and in charge... avert your fucking gaze. I gorge on stolen glances when I enter subway cars. The *glare* ignores! The *glare* ignores! The *glare* ignores! Say what you are thinking out loud. Let me hear you give me advice on how to shed the pounds because I bet I’ve never thought, heard or tried it before. I am overweight- not deaf, blind or dumb! I can hear the thoughts through your eyes. I see the condescension in your laugh... I may not own ANY wicker chairs, yet I am weaved together with self-control. I am ten grades of feist, hormones and humiliation- giving me the control... no matter the size of the attraction keep your hands to yourself. I own this... this FAT is from you. I am filled with smug looks and hopeless scowls. Don’t call it depression; this is realization...

In “Atlantic” Cemya explored a pivotal point in her life—the day her father left:

Before my father lost his mind. I loved him... I swear- I thought my father was God... I remember that day I told my father that sometimes I get afraid of the dark. He looked down at his feet griped my hand a little tighter and said, “whenever you get afraid, whenever you get afraid, stare at the moon. Know that God is sitting behind it protecting you. And that when you were born he matched you with one of his angels and she has wings and that is your guardian. If anything ever happens to you, she will fly back to God, tell *him* and all the other angels that you need help and then heaven, heaven will come down and save you from whatever trouble you may be in and that way the monsters you’re afraid of will never get a chance to bite you.” ... *Now*, I know monsters don’t live there and these days there’s no more seashells for children to steal and I’ve learned that the moon controls the tide, so I don’t blame the water for having ADHD anymore but... I haven’t seen my father the same way since either ‘cuz I saw the ocean in him once- that day when he said goodbye, when he opened my bedroom door with his *whole* life packed into green and black cases gave me, the kinda hug that says I’m sorry and left in a taxi. And when he left I closed the door again and threw my headphones back on but no one- no one can ever ignore the ocean... I saw the Atlantic pool itself in his eyes when he hugged me, so the first day I saw him cry was the last day I loved him. On that day –he wasn’t God anymore ...

Here Ceyma uses her poetry to process, not only feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and vulnerability, but also the realization that the idealistic image she held of her father is no longer valid. It is important to note that while many artists do write about the actual problems they are facing, sometimes writing about something other than their own troubles serves as a coping mechanism or means of escape as discussed by Sergio during our interview:

... I was going through, uh a rough time in my personal life and, uh... it was the first time I'd ever really written slam to be performed and 'uh (I) just like poured everything I had into it and like really used it as a distraction for the weeks leading up to it to try and get myself really into it.

*Listening.* Many poets cited the significance of the performative aspect of spoken word because of the listening it required. In non-competitive open mic settings, regardless of how poorly a person may perform, it is expected that all will be treated with respect, allotted their time on stage, and applauded. This was the case with a young man who regularly performed at Political Poets. He would attend the open mics by himself and didn't interact with audience members. His performances were long, monotonous, and often incoherent poems/songs sung off-key; however, he was always shown respect by the hosts and audience members through attentive listening and applause. Guy spoke about the important role spoken word open mics can play for individuals that may feel silenced, alone, outcast, or ignored in their everyday lives:

...people need an outlet and people often don't have one. They don't have people to talk to or people that will listen. An open mic is one of those few places where, for the most part, people are forced to listen to you, in a way- in a positive way; I'm not saying forced in a negative way, but it's like there's – this is literally a space dedicated to people getting on a stage, saying things out of their mouth and people are here- paying money- to LISTEN... you know that you have guaranteed

an audience... And I think that having open mics like that um, sometimes can be such a beautiful thing... such a release for people...

In a reflection essay Rae Ann spoke about using her poetry to be heard, “Writing is something I’ve always done and I hold it really really close to my heart... I use it to help me understand, escape, and transform this world in[to] what I want and need for it to be... I am so used to being unheard or not listened to...” Lexie spoke about using the spoken word poetry to find a place for her to explore the dissonance in her narrative and to have her story heard and valued:

... it was the only place I felt like I was heard... in inner city New York then attending you know a school that was somewhat affluent and then not feeling like there was a reconciliation between those two worlds, that stage allowed me... the audiences that responded to that, so audiences from all sides. I think it allowed me um, a place where that story was important and had a-a place. Um and while I-I think that’s still true, you know I think for me the point- yeah I think for me the point of spoken word might still be the same- it’s the only place that allows so many parts of myself to come out...

*Trauma.* During their interviews Guy, Jessica, and Jane brought up the topics of trauma and silencing:

[the purpose of spoken word poetry is] um, to tell stories... share your story... to give a voice to things that... often remain silent and to create a community.

I think that open mics and slam and poetry in general really uh, just like any artist community, I mean I think that a lot of people are coming at it from places of perha- trauma seems like a big word, but I think that a lot of people are coming from places of trauma, places of just trying to unravel where their life is and-and I think that also like *chicken and egg* I think that sometimes when you start writing, you explore those things in yourself and then the community is such that like it’s very open to people talking about *anything*...

...one of the reasons we partake of art is because it helps us heal. Um, which is...sometimes used too simplistically- the word, you know, “it’s healing.” Um, because I think it’s a complex thing that happens. Part of it is that um, telling these truths in a public setting brings them out of the darkness. And the darkness

is where they fester. And they just bring us shame and shame I think is one of the most destructive forces. Um, and so exposing that light um, can be personally transformative.

For many poets spoken word is an empowering way of breaking their silence around traumatic experiences, as it provides not only a platform to be heard, but also freedom from social norms surrounding appropriate topics for public discourse among strangers. Trilling (1972:99-100) argues that norms are allowed to be broken within this context because, “The work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist wholly by the laws of its own being, which include the right to embody painful, ignoble, or socially unacceptable subject-matters.” After performing in front of her college peers Emmy noted the importance of discovering art as a way of empowering silenced voices and topics. She shared the following with audience members:

... I think I learned, um recently actually, that a lot of times, especially from a social context, there's a lot of things that need to be said that aren't always necessarily appropriate. And I feel like um art is a good place to say those things because you can be free and you can say the thing that you wanna say or say the thing that you feel like needs to be said...

In some respects it could be argued that poets are able to regain power by speaking publically about taboo issues. Zerubavel (2006:63-64) argues that, “Breaking a conspiracy of silence, in short, involves making the elephant's presence part of the public discourse... publicity plays a critical role in efforts to prevent as well as counteract denial...” (Zerubavel 2006:63-64); therefore, the public performance of poems involving traumatic narratives may serve as an intensely therapeutic experience since audience members are generally strangers who cannot deny or refute the poets' account.

A few poets spoke at great lengths about traumatic experiences in both their poetry and reflections. One such poet was Kyle. In the following poem and reflection excerpt he discusses the topic of depression (poem is shown in the original format submitted by the author with the exception of omitted sections indicated by ellipsis):

### **12 Years A Slime Covered Page**

... Residue stuck between  
The empty spaces  
Of my hands anatomy.  
Between Now  
And then.  
Between Regret  
And the things I want  
Forgiven.  
That's when I wrote my first poem  
On paper  
That soaked up my emotions.  
It was fourth grade  
and I stared into the  
sink of a page  
watching my hands  
rub together  
The Shame.  
The Sadness.  
The Anger.  
The Madness.  
And I'm being vague  
for a reason.  
No amount of soft imagery  
is gonna make this  
Romantic.  
Stories of Depression  
aren't something  
I want people to  
Fall  
in love with -  
Depression is Slime

Stuck on the surface.  
As My Hands keep rubbing  
under the faucet,  
I watch it get  
harder and harder  
to wash daily.  
And No One Sees this  
But Me...

This poem [12 Years A Slime Covered Page] addressed a very real issue that I've been dealing with for years but I've been really good at concealing from the fear of judgment, abandonment, silencing, pity, and so forth. Depression isn't something that just goes away in time and I've been trying to wash it from me with every poem I write, as I talked about in this poem. It was nerve-racking on a whole other level from the simple fact that most people don't understand how Depression works and if you're not sulking all the time, people don't believe you have Depression. As the exuberant, smiley, outgoing person I am, I walk invisible in this slime and people can easily walk around me without even knowing what I'm slugging around. And so for the second practicum being in that small space and performing this piece was a challenge – was a moment of true vulnerability and reflection on my potential to speak justice to things not always spoken.

Kyle went on to speak about his desire to become an art therapist, which is very much tied to his own struggles and traumatic experiences of navigating a world in which being a young black transgender male is rarely affirmed:

This type of work – affirmation work, healing work – is what I want to do with my poetry and...performing spoken word. I want to do Art Therapy – for which I would work with inner city young people of color who may or may not be in the LGBTQ community as well. I want to work with this demographic because young people – especially beginning in middle school – begin to interact most heavily with cognitive messages of systematic racism, sexism, cissexism, and classism. They begin to develop more clear messages with their stricter interactions with authority and institutional control. As a result, things like anger, depression, isolation, self-loathing, and so on can manifest and greatly disadvantage their ability to engage in their surroundings – ie. the education system. In dealing with these symptoms of the battle between power, privilege and oppression, young people of color tend to get harmed and trapped in things like the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration, drug abuse and potentially addiction, gang and interpersonal violence, and other potentially harmful trappings. In facilitating avenues of healing through poetry and spoken word, I hope to give young people

of color the possibility of having healthier ways of processing trauma, more in depth self-reflection, and cognitive tools of fighting back against the holds that power, privilege and oppression place on them. I would love to teach them how to tell their stories, be heard, create change in their lives and social change in the lives of others – because storytelling has always been a bridge between communities and breaks down distance created by difference and ignorance. This is the process of healing. This is process of obtaining justice. This is the process of rebirthing truth.

Oliva, a graduate student, used her poetry to process a physically painful medical procedure (poem is shown in the original format submitted by the author with the exception of omitted sections indicated by ellipsis):

### **The patient**

... The prosthesis is removed, rinsed, sitting passively on the table next to the reclining chair  
I am cleansed  
Supine and ready  
Silent and calm  
Fingers slide gel in my mouth  
A strange infiltration  
*This with numb the pain*  
A fear wells up inside me  
Why will there be pain?  
I can't ask, with these hands on my tongue, an obstruction  
They both tower over me,  
It hard to see the details of their faces in the bright light, the sick eerie glow of halogen  
I think how beautiful this is, and how strange this view  
Blue rubber gloves  
White masks  
Safety goggles  
Who is in need of such protection?  
Me from them  
Or them from me  
*Suction!*  
... I feel the twists and pull  
Pressure  
But no pain  
Yet  
Filing

Manipulating  
My precious missing piece  
My forgotten wholeness  
He shows me a mirror, and asks me what I see  
*Looks the same to me*  
He is aghast, how can I dismiss this art so thoroughly  
How dare I  
There is ... awkward silence  
I give into the pressure of a “proper” response  
*I guess... It feels better?*  
*Well it should!*  
He exudes self-satisfied confidence  
But I sense hollow victory  
My concerns are functional  
His are aesthetic...

In a reflective essay Olivia connected her experience to the larger issue of America’s lack of access to affordable healthcare, resulting in the inability for some individuals to maintain physical gendered beauty norms, thus visually stigmatizing their lower socio-economic status:

“The Patient” is from last year when I was missing my front left tooth, and came to realize that my once lauded proper feminine performance was undermined, and that a man in a white mask would consistently make me feel bad for having an opinion; mostly for not adhering to his brand of physical appeal versus being a bad patient (though the two are problematically intermingled). I really found most of this experience quite funny... until it wasn’t. There were a few days, when I couldn’t pass (my prosthetic didn’t fit) or I was in pain (or there was blood) that it wasn’t funny anymore. That is why I wrote both “the Patient” and another piece as part of a qualitative inquiry paper “the Abyss.” It was only through poetry that I could figure out the affective responses others and myself were having to my stigmatized mouth. I was sensing my lack in a very visceral way, emotional and tiring; the play with this face that I had enjoyed in the beginning became laborious and tedious. Hours I would have to spend each day, rising, cleaning the space... the process of cleaning, cultivating proper appearance for the piece. Each meal came with challenges, came with dangers. Then finally, it broke, and a new false piece was installed, I am whole, and this implant will outlive my fleshy form, a testament to that doctor’s skill... unfortunately. The theme of cleansing comes to me in many forms, I was look for absolution, resolution but instead the experience of a patient in a doctor’s office... dentist’s office brought a lot of that sense to fore. It is a clean white space, that is based on aesthetic engagement. Cleaning,



pulling, cleansing, everyone loves going to see the dentist. I just have a more fraught experience than most... So that's my justification for pulling that ol' poem out. This semester has been a wonderful opportunity... I am ecstatic to have a new outlet, and new plane through which to engage/share my work. Spoken word is work that cannot be left on the page, it must be shared. Not in a static book, but with people, it is the visceral, the meaty, the hearty meal of art that we all desire to engage/hear. The social justice imperative is based in the need to speak up, speak out against injustices that plague us, and of course the irony of the university campus is one of my personal favorite targets (other than the American healthcare system, and "proper" femininity). I have learned much about myself and this work through this class and I am thankful for it... I want to use this method to explore the issues of health and wellness in a neoliberal era. What does it mean to be black and poor and missing teeth, as an employee at the University, under the System, and having to wait in line at Mission of Mercy? What does it mean when you are from another country (not one with socialized medicine) and are too waiting in that line, even though your advisor won four million in grants over the past years and you have a TAsip? How can these positionalities be explored/understood through spoken word, and how can we be in conversation with staff, faculty and administration in more poignant ways confronting the social determinants of health?

Some poets spoke quite literally about poetry keeping them alive as evidenced in another student reflection and performances discussing suicide:

Poetry is literally my everything. I literally don't know what I would do without discovering poetry. Poetry has saved my life and continued to give me ways to make the best out of what I have... When I write, I write to heal, to meditate, to reflect...

...trauma, mental health and therapy all these things um I guess in the west are often such... individual things. This one thing happened to me... this is my attempt to talk about all that... Trigger warning for suicide... I started thinking about killing myself when I was 5 years old not about killing myself as I was-cute and full of possibility, but about killing an older taller version. One with longer hair or none at all... police cars hovering past they would never suspect the palm tree kid, the balloon pen, the toy pistol, and the real knife... 2030 will be a simpler time for murder only happens under state surveillance, where the hemlock is grown on the white house lawn, where we have robots to do all the dirty work, where everything is that much more honest. Five year old me would sidle up next to the house I live in look through the windows at my lover... tonight I need to kill you. Tonight I need to be the little girl who killed you. I figured this way I

would know when I would die and who would do it and when- that I would die at the hands of a good kid at least and live to just under 40 like any good short story- the perfect blend of murder and suicide...

...this is for my mother- a long hose reaching down her throat to pump death from her stomach. She told me what heartbreak tasted like- on the way back up. This is for my best friend who tried to bleach out her insides as it burns on the way down- keep out of reach of small children and self destructive adolescence. This is for me. A psych nurse asked me if I believed in things that no one could see or hear- you mean like God? Well most people believe in God so – so the thin line of sanity is drawn by popular opinion. It was like the plastic bag I was gonna tie over my head after sleeping pills- the condensation from my breath settling on my face- like dew, but I never finished what I started. I only tried to picture my face asphyxiated, but I didn't even know what that looked like... [I] am glad that I failed at something.

In addition to providing artists with an outlet, many poets felt that audience members may also benefit from the experience by connecting with their stories. Though she found it difficult, Jessica shared poems about her struggles with body identity and weight in hopes of helping other young women:

Yeah. Um I think one thing that's been really hard is like so I talk a *lot* about body identity and weight. Um, and-and stuff like that and I think one thing that's been hard um it is not like I'm super overweight right, so like I have been chubby my whole life and I've existed in that identity, but like I also have like a 155 po-like right. Like I'm-I'm like marginally, you know, slightly above average and so I think that what's hard is like people sometimes are like who was that poem about? Or like um, oh- you know, an-and a lot of times an-and I think its *fair*, but like it's still my truth. If people come up to me and be like you're not a big girl you're- I'm like yeah you're missing the point of the poem, like this is not about what you think about me or people will come up and be like, but you're so beautiful and I'm like- okay, um and the other thing within that is like I have a very close relationship with my mother, but my mom was always really hard on me about my weight and so *that's* hard sometimes I don't wanna share poems that accuse her of like these- 'cuz there's there's specific moments that I remember, um and so that can be hard, but I do share them a lot. I feel like for me like I-I teach poetry at an all girls school after school I feel like- and also I just think my poems tend to speak to like young women in a way and so I'm like if I'm not being truthful then I'm painting this image of something that doesn't exist and people are listening and you just have to be aware of that I think.

JBT elaborated on why some artists' share personal information stating:

... they feel that there's someone in the audience who needs to hear what they're saying and who may be going through something similar who's not willing to get on stage and share it and so a lot of people have found healing uh by listening to other people get up on stage and be vulnerable and so the artists who do that work um I think they recognize that even if it doesn't feel good for them; it's necessary for others.

Guy affirmed JBT's belief saying, "... you don't know who you can connect with, that may have gone through the same thing as you did... and can learn from that and become better from that... and how powerful that can be." Jane described such performances as a selfless gift of recognition:

... if you're in the audience and you've had a similar experience or it may not even be about, you may not even have experienced childhood *sexual abuse*, but maybe you've experienced bullying or something else that made you feel the way the poem makes, you know, it-it's about recognition – oh, I'm not the only person to have had that experience or to feel that response. Um, that can be powerfully transforming and um so I think it's a great act of kindness to share that work.

While poetry can certainly serve a therapeutic function for poets and audience members Jane and Afram cautioned that spoken word poetry should not be reduced to or used in lieu of therapy and that high levels of self disclosure within ones' own community may be more harmful than beneficial and therefore should not be made public:

Well, I do think uh it should always be remembered that just because someone uses the first person, the poem may not be about them. Uh, or they may have taken some details from their own life and from someone else's to craft the piece. Um, it is a work of art. It's not a group therapy session. Um, that doesn't mean it doesn't have therapeutic effects and it does, but it is a work of art and so I uh always caution people to not, unless the poet tells us directly "yes, this is about me" um, to not make that assumption.

... Uh, there's actually a whole great book of poetry about my divorce that doesn't exist 'cuz I felt like it was too much, so I didn't even write it. You

knowwhati'msayin'. I probably should've been writing about it at the time, but it's not the kinda stuff I woulda shared. Um, so I do think it's a weakness as a poet that I don't like – share more, but then maybe it's a strength because I keep, you know, shit that shouldn't be – like I heard poets say things (laughs) they should've said in therapy or to the person that it was about...

*Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-identity through Reflexive Practice*

... I've been writing more honest poetry... I've been writing more about self. So that's a big thing that happens a lot, we poets, a lot of poets tend to just write about the world or write about everything in the world, but we never really write about... how the world affects us... I'm grateful for how art has allowed me to grow and evolve and get to know parts of myself that I thought never existed and parts of myself that I threw away and that that I didn't wanna face... ~Guy

Artists' poems are an account of their lives whether or not they mean them to be.

What an individual does or does not write, how they define topics and circumstances, and the tone of their poems all give insight into who they are, where they come from, and how they view the world. McCormick (2000:194) describes poetry as, “a sanctuary within, a place to play out conflict and imagine multiple possibilities for identity,” where people, “become subjects rather than the objects of their own experience.” She suggests that, “writing may be a route to an expressive self-confidence that alters the writer's perception of self and the outer world” (McCormick 2000:195), which is precisely what my research found. As artists wrote about their lives they were able to explore, reinforce, create, and reject identities and social constructs. Frequently exhibiting the challenger self, the poetry, of artists whose work fell into this theme, highlighted four topics: stigma, erasure, gender, and authenticity.

*Stigma.* Goffman ([1963]1986:3-4) defines the term stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” of which there are three types:

First there are abominations of the body—the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior. Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family.

Poets most commonly addressed stigmas around individual character. Jacob spoke about mental illness and living with bipolar disorder:

... I write a lot about um a lot of what I'm saying and writing... is um uh bipolar disorder and mental illness and awareness. I'm trying to combat stigmas that come along with that um and also where uh having mental illness meets spirituality. I'm trying to navigate that myself... He's a little- off- off kilter, off his rocker, or off in left field, off putting- off the mark... bipolar artists they love like wild things and sleep- they crash like cars take their vacations... come on get happy- dance in the parade that you can feel heading over the cliff in droves... just wants to be one of them- to be *on* the mark... he is marked; it won't wash off because it's not on his skin... please doctor how many different combos of pills, my god the colors- he takes them off the counter when company comes over.

... I'm a jumper on a bridge holding a prescription from a doctor which reads quite legibly, “dissolve your persona in living water, apply love topically per hand on shoulder for instructions see an angel showing kindness to her dimwitted father...” see the cold that a homeless human being caught through assuming eyes... I'm warm, swaying in my music and ugly hat and then my marbles find me... speak truth and put me to silence or in silence give me truth and speak...

...but that's depression. It's always better to have desperation to feel... you're still hanging in there when you're noting things like ‘wow my demographic is lonely...

...oh dear God in safety we trust. Wrap me like a pig in safety; let me feel good about myself. I can get behind safety; it's what allows me to put this pistol in my bag. Oh safety sing to me, safety tell me a bedtime story; it's morning and I'm tired ... out of breath because we need to have a serious conversation. I just know

I'll be called into the office today. Safety help my fingers and toes tell me I'm okay... I'll die of exposure; I'll sew my lips shut and methodically moan in meters so that literary authority... my pen-man-ship is sick... gender exclusivity and moves like a woman during sex... out of frustration opening a fucking jar of pickles. Out of losing consciousness, out of crazy and crazy and crazy out of lithium... Prozac... Zoloft... out of safety- out of the spiraling soup of safety... love I smoke cigarettes because I am lonely... love you need a body. I wanna make love to love itself- I've never had sex with an it before... love increase my common sense. Love make me an expert at something. Love give me that certain edge. Love make me a natural. Love give me more finesse. Love I don't know if I can pay for this. Love take these weapons out of my mouth... love talk to me like an equal... Love would you jump in front of me? Love would you convince me suicide's a bad idea... when I'm seriously wondering? Love eat the darkness in me. Love I can feel my heartbeat in my brain and love tell me why people have to listen so hard to hear God's voice. Love give me purpose in a bag. Love kick me in the ass. Love teach me how to pray. Love make me not afraid of huggers. Love I really do smoke cigarettes because I'm lonely.

While many individuals would choose to engage in stigma management, particularly when in the company of strangers or acquaintances, who would not otherwise be aware of a character stigma, Jacob used his poetry to fully expose the stigma of mental illness in a public space in hopes of reducing and eliminating it. He worked to redefine mental illness in a way that was humanizing and relatable. Through his art Jacob demonstrated a thorough awareness of his condition and the actions that stigmatize him, thus breaking the perception that those living with a mental illness are all “crazy” and “delusional.” He also discussed the more common and less stigmatized problem of depression, which audience members are likely to relate to as well as general feelings of loneliness and a desire for love, which all are likely to connect with. This is a technique that appears to be quite successful in which poets use high levels of self-disclosure to address and reduce stigmatized selves by reframing the marginalized identities and demonstrating multidimensional personas. Lisa explained it as using her poetry to connect with the

audience in order for them to: "... see me more um, clearly as I want to be seen or as I need to be seen." She elaborates in the following interview excerpt, "I think art is just a way that we can- we have more control over what is depicted of our story um and you can't control an audience's reactions, but you can frame and shape it and set it to be only in a certain degree of something..." Another way of reducing stigma is to connect the stigmatized self to larger historical and/or social problems e.g. a formerly incarcerated African American male using poetry to detail a former life of crime and imprisonment while connecting his experience to the American legacy of slavery, racism, and the prison industrial complex. Regardless of the method, if as Gauntlett (2008) argues, the stigmatized artist is able to maintain a strong enough narrative—that explains the stigmatizing events—they may in the case of character stigmas, be able to overcome it.

*Erasure.* Erasing aspects of ones' identity came out in poems about assimilation and biracial identity. In "Red Squiggly Lines" the author challenges the notion of assimilation when it comes to her Nigerian name. She explains how her name is intimately connected to her culture and participation in the common practice of using an American nickname is an act of erasure:

... dear red squiggle under my name (audience laughter)... I cannot fault you for falling under the common assimilating assumption that I meant to spell Abisol okay Simon (audience laughter). In Nigeria parents select the names of their children *very* carefully. Some because they know their daughters will grow up big and strong. Others because even within a miles' radius they want everyone to know exactly which tribe she comes from...because we carry our ancestors on our back like me. I am neck deep in Nigerian culture and six feet under in American curses. See I use to think I was blessed with this seemingly easy four syllables, but apparently even *that* is an alphabet spoonful too many... For every single first time encounter with every single student in one of my classes. "I'm sorry what

did you say your name was again?" For the professor who exasperatedly looks at the attendance sheet then instead of calling the next name on the list... she screams, "I'm really sorry if I mispronounce the next name." I see beadlets of sweat forming on her brow... She blinks unsure if she read the name correctly. I think to myself my name must be an anamonapea. It must be like BOOM in their throats. It must hurt to say it their tongues must contort... maybe they think my name means become extremely uncomfortable. Maybe my name means become extremely uncomfortable "here" I call out wanting to end the suspense the teacher- she screams, "Oh, thank you Abby"... a professor noticing the sadness resonating over my face asks me, "Is there something wrong?" "Yes" I replied. You see some people search their whole lives for their meaning and Nigerians have it handed down to them at birth. You see Abby doesn't mean anything in my language. Did you hear the middle name Coretta... destined to marry a king, practically engaged with or without a ring? My name is a complete sentence- I am born into wealth destined to marry a king because death does not know me. I cannot allow the world to continue to bastardize... a name more palatable for their appetite...

Another way in which the topic of erasure was explored was in relation to the biracial experience. Poets spoke about the ways in which others used their biracial heritage to challenge or erase parts of their racial identities. Keona spoke about growing up biracial and feeling torn between two worlds:

When I was little I used to think I was stuck in a dream and that I'd wake up as a white girl dancing in a kitchen big enough to hold two steps and swinging hips. When I was little my mother warned me that my life as a mixed girl would be a hard kinda shuffle with one heel on the edge of grandma's trimmed lawns and blue houses and the other on daddy's street corners... playgrounds on daddy's street corners where glass blankets the bottom of playgrounds... I often think of this skin more costume than home, constantly straddling minstrel show and white picket fence perfection. For some the definition of trauma is being first to ignore those casualties... a constant and deafening silence as you choke back the struggles. Some days the only thing I can do is picture myself skinny with blue eyes like my grandmother with short brown hair... let everyone know that I'm super gay and super confident and super fit into this community like that full moon... I was raised white. I was taught to be a graceful child... there in the back of my mouth was a lump in my throat was the words "I need help." I kept choking on myself constantly tying my tongue around the bedpost silently... I was always too big boned and too brown-skinned to fit into in the first place... when you're not really black is laughed at in your face... breasts and backbone too big for



Victoria Secret- when high school can be a trap for an already stressed identity. Skin too light not to be afraid of black hands running through your hair in the locker room after gym class so – you’re mixed or somethin’... some days... I am... a brown daughter to a white mother- still trying to find the perfect kitchen to dance in and I hope to god there is more in me than a wanting to beat somebody up.

Teyanna discussed the frustration of dealing with colorism, describing the double oppression of being ostracized by the black community she identifies with, particularly when her phenotype does not allow her to racially pass, as well as racial discrimination from society in general.

... every time I get to the second verse in Lift Every Voice and Sing I am reminded that *I* am an Oreo. That’s right- I said it Oreo, but with chocolate filling profoundly shaped by the circumstances of my upbringing black- all the way through. I was raised in the 49<sup>th</sup> state of the union to adopt the Martin Luther King holiday singing the Negro national anthem once a year was a throwaway gesture designed to protect the white liberals from their guilt sung as slowly as a funeral dirge... the second verse was nearly always left out in order to keep the service under an hour so *I never* got a chance to learn the words. One time my mom asked my dad to go to the KFC to pick up dinner and she gave him the list and then she realized that she’d forgotten to put mashed potatoes on that list so she called the KFC and she said “excuse me but when my husband gets there would you please tell him that we also need mashed potatoes” and they said “I’m sorry ma’am it’s extremely busy we will have noo way of knowing which one is your husband” and my mom said he’s black and my dad came home with mashed potatoes... When I was little I use to wish I was darker, maybe then I would get it. Maybe then I would *understand*, maybe then I could be proud of whatever it was that everyone was staring at or my friends wouldn’t forget that I was black and then expect me to be proud of them for it or... or maybe just maybe when there were other black kids in the cafeteria I would sit with them or *they* would *fucking* sit with me... I am me and in this racist society *this* is black enough. It’s black enough to get a DWB. It’s black enough to be followed in stores. It’s black enough to be told don’t touch my toys you’ll get them dirty. It’s black enough for my white best friend to put ‘whites only’ and ‘blacks only’ signs up all over my house and her mother not to understand why *my* mother was so upset... I’m black enough to be a librarian... I’m also black enough to know that having to read the words to the second verse of Lift Every Voice and Sing has *nothing* to do with whether or not I’m black enough.

At the end of her poem Teyanna attacked racial authenticity testing by asserting that her knowledge of black culture (i.e. knowing every word to the second verse of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”) does not determine the legitimacy of her black identity. Reggie spoke about his biracial brother’s journey of trying to project the identities placed on him by society before coming to his own definition of self:

... an older biracial brother who got picked on as a kid and thought as though he had to shape his identity to face what society asked of him. So as a result he’s gone through so many split personalities I don’t even know who the man is anymore. He went through his Bone Thugs in Harmony I’m Bizzy Bone rappin’ real fast phase. He went through his Egyptian scholar with the hieroglyphics phase. He went through his Muslim most dedicated to my religion phase. He went through his Dragon Ball Z... phase- his sign language interpreter phase. Amiss all these different identities who he was and who he is on the inside remain the same, so you ask him who he is he will tell you my name is Chris Aaron... I am not black I am not white...

In a reflection essay about a recent performance Kyle wrestled with his ambivalence over asserting a newfound racial identity:

However, what was different about performing for Native American Indian History Month was that I got to speak to a part of me that remained hidden for most of my life. I learned just earlier this year that I have Indigenous roots two generations back – my mother’s father was an Indigenous man. Since my finding, I have been slowly looking more into my heritage and how that manifests beside My Blackness. In thinking about how these two raisings expand into each other, I also carry a lot of doubt in being able to be Black and Indigenous and looking into my histories. I think about whether or not I can even claim some Indigenous knowing/connection to the Spirituality of Creation – especially in creating this poem, especially in performing my truth.

*Gender.* Through their art Amarina, Naya, Zina, Kim, and Alexandra confronted gender norms and systems of inequality, while also encouraging women to speak up, stand strong in their truths, and embrace who they were. Amarina used much of her writing as a space for exploring identity conflict. She largely examined her gender,

sexual, national, and racial identities as well as abuse, and family dysfunction. In the following excerpts from one of her autobiographical poems the Survivor/Helper Self is evident as she discusses these identities and topics:

... Women have always been the center of things beautiful for me. Becoming woman has always been the center of my girlhood... when I bled for the first time I told only my best friend... assured her that this blood meant we could make babies. Being girl and vulnerable meant I had to run faster than itchy fingers, farther than sweaty palms reaching for my hands, my tiny breasts had to be brave against the full fling of his fury—when I refused, when I stabbed him pencil point sliding swift into his flesh—the whole house stirred and slipped silly into a frenzy and I was proud of my pencil point sharp and without fear. My aunt beat me anyway and I cried more out of loneliness than anything. One cousin's name still remains quiet upon my tongue—I think of him when I am sad or angry or afraid of things that do not make noises in the dark. The other one stark raving mad showed me his dick told me I smelled like a woman in my little girl's body hips barely budding he cornered me in the hallway the bathroom, when I bled I washed quick and quiet in secret... yesterday my mother told me to write my story no matter that I write her in unflattering truths... I wished that every girl whose mother left would give her permission unnecessary, but grand to say what happened to her flesh and fury to write how she survived the splendor of being a small girl in a big world that so deeply favors men...

During both her performance and Q & A session as well as her poems, she spoke of the difficulties she had faced throughout her lifetime due to her refusal to subscribe to gender norms both in her appearance and language and using her writing to explore these struggles of defining who she was and rejecting the identities others labeled her with. Another poet, Naya, discussed the weight of trying to live up to unrealistic physical and emotional standards of being the ideal black woman, but also prefaced the poem by saying it was for any woman or lover of women:

When I come around, some they try to break me down, no one knows just what's inside to concerned with the outside, why they messin' with my mind?—Black woman. At a very young age I was taught to use my own shoulder as a pillow when the weight was heavy. Tie my shoes tight as to walk my talk without tripping, smile like Miss America on days I felt like second runner up, pray to

God to fortify the God-strength in me, learn to spell my own name correctly so no one else could define me, bite my tongue to hold back the beasted growls in me, stand up tall Black statue seekin' liberty, march like a soldier on the journey to my destiny and always look back when my future seems unclear to me, but I'm just learning that it's okay for me—to cry. I once stood still, voice concealed, stamped symbol of asexuality and from mammy to video vixen I've listened, paid attention to what I am and what I am not to be—forever your cowardly spirited soliloquy... I choose devoutly my foe, to be Black woman—strong... I be Queen Sheba heart of gold, giver of spice and stone—Amazonian princess positioned on the throne mane of a lioness and a mind of my own—sharp in my bite, but delicate in my tone. Eyes like a hawk and strong in my bones—took time to realize that I can't make it on my own. Sister to my brother 'cuz his battle's rollin' on. Made beautiful by the creator of fabric intricately sewn. Black woman, Black women, women—be.

Here Naya chooses to redefine beauty as internal and something that black women (or women in general) obtain by being true to and embracing that which they are rather than attempting to fit into a predetermined mold created by others. Zina also challenged femininity and beauty. She introduced her poem by talking about men finding her physical appearance and actions to be incongruent—constantly telling her she was too pretty to cry, cuss, and fight. Her poem explores the notion of physically beautiful women being seen and not heard:

Yes, you love me so much. I am such a beautiful thing. You can't—stop—staring. But when I start talking you'd rather my silence. How can a beautiful woman be so damn violent? And when I start yelling, you covered your ears—how can a beautiful woman instill so much fear? And when my words start smacking you in the face with the truth, you lie to yourself again, you say 'maybe, well maybe I've had one too many shots of patron before I gave her that damn compliment.' Well after all, to be beautiful well, that's the best compliment I can get from a man, now isn't it? isn't it? Well honey, well—consider me uglier than the devil sitting in hell because I am never going to shut up.

In another poem about gender, Kim spoke about the multiple roles, characteristics, and identities of “real” women:

Real women I know have flaws, not just cellulite and acne scars or body odor or

bad musical taste, but serious flaws. Flaws like cheating on our partners or stealing our best friend's lovers, flaws like looking for what's the best inside of ourselves... inside of somebody else—assuming crisis assuming miracle or assuming nothing at all. Real women I know never knew how we grew up so fast holding fists out with eyes closed we become wives, divorcees, widows—we become addicts, abusers, liars. We become all that we didn't understand about the adult world shocked that the little girls in us haven't yet disappeared. Real women I know keep no good friends on the couch for months don't bug them about their hustling, let them back in when they come knocking at the door. Real women I know are in therapy and madly in loooove with our shrinks, happy to talk about the sad parts, sad to talk about the happy parts, sick of going on medication. Real women I know destroy ourselves with work or television or people who refuse to treat us well, we are persistent in this effort and yet we cannot refuse the invitation to continue on. Real women I know work thousands of miles away from home, collect barrettes in a chest of drawers, pack cardboard boxes full of soap, shampoo, and candy to send home. Real women I know support the economies of entire countries. Real bio women I know aren't women at all, but tranny boys gender queer, gender fluid, with short hair and button down shirts—genitalia only one tiny part of the gender puzzle—when the world offers so much more. Real women I know laugh in bed while smoking weed and eating Girl Scout cookies, post diagrams for their partners on how to give oral sex properly by the bed...

Through her writing Kim challenges ideas about what “real” women do and who “real” women are, as well as, encourages women to never give up on themselves. Alexandra's poetry was dedicated to finding her voice and using it to fight patriarchy and misogyny. In “Autobiography,” she explores the ways in which black feminists are labeled and pathologized for vocalizing their beliefs and experiences:

I wanted to write some “hear my roar” type shit...throw some feminist type fit. I wanted to get on the stage and scream. Drop a missile to the floor until I ripped it at its seams, but then would I just be another woman contributing to the noise? Declarations of my inner strength and how much I hated the boys- I'd be labeled angry black woman at worst and strong black woman at best, but generalizations of my proclamations are impossible to digest... I have too much to express and my moxy is a trait that too many would like to suppress. They'd rather see me as a damsel in distress, only good for getting undressed, but they don't know that when I get naked there's still a permanent s on my chest. I am not mad; I just am. And I will speak whether or not you choose to give a damn because I am not a Barbie doll only meant for showcase in a box. I am not your topic of conversation

for the gym the bar or the block. But now I am speaking in terms that you refuse to understand... You're wondering when I got this way. And you're wondering why and I think it may have something to do with that day two summers ago in July- that day I had my soul stripped from my core. I looked completely different in the sunlight... See, I'm carrying tons of weight-boulders- memories of rock bottom sitting on my shoulders. Come close- see the scars I'm no longer afraid to show? Hell, these scars wrote the best chapters in my life's bio, but I'm shedding the layers deciding to let go. My view of the world now so much more intense than I ever thought I could know, but I am not mad. I just am. And I will speak whether or not you choose to give a damn. I will speak if you catcall or grab me on the street. I will speak if you call me outside of my name when we first meet... I will speak. I will speak. Yes, I will speak, but I am not mad. I just am...

As previously demonstrated by Zane's poem challenging the idea of the stoic male in times of emotional anguish, discussion of gender was not limited to females.

J.T. used his poetry to dispute the stereotype of men solely equating intimacy with sex and viewing it as the exclusive priority in a relationship:

Dear women-look ...I'm taken back by the bad rap guys get when they... build the courage to ask you back to the place... you say uhm umm (laughter). This date hasn't progressed at the rate that you think... contemplate your chance at getting into these pants, unfortunately for you I am not whore. I do not hook up... And now I'm really fucking confused as to what you thought I wanted- is it just too hard to believe that I find you and me watchin' TV over a cup of coffee or... tea or just maybe I could show you the books that I tend to read or we could have a conversation... or is it impossible for you to see me? You're on my dick... sometimes guys... we just wanna fucking cuddle ...that's right I said cuddle because guys too can see the benefit to two people kicking off their shoes who are just in the mood – to spoon 'cuz it's not all about the sex and although it's great and I mean like really fucking good... more to guys than just sex there's laughter, there's romance, there's the quivers when we slow dance, there's the smile that you give me... there's the spark that exists between our lips when we kiss and the emotions after a fight ...there's more to guys than just sex there's- you... men like me fall through the cracks of your self constricted reality... it's about time for some women to open their eyes and you just might find that man with whom you belong... he may not be the perfect man... we men are scared because we have been hurt too...

Rickey performed a piece in which he spoke about women emasculating men when they

do not get their way saying, "...Lola challenges my manhood when she doesn't get her way even when I give her what she wants she still has the nerve to call me gay...."

Throughout the poem Rickey uses the character "Lola" to represent conflicted women who want men to provide everything for them- yet be entirely independent, are unwilling to compromise, project the pain of failed relationships on current lovers, and use men's masculinity as a weapon. Kyle spoke about the complexity of his experiences as a transgender man. In the following poem he discusses how black men are often stereotyped as violent perpetrators. He speaks about understanding the fear women hold of being physically and sexually assaulted, while simultaneously knowing what it feels like to be seen as a predator (poem is shown in the original format submitted by the author with the exception of omitted sections indicated by ellipsis):

### **The Fear in Her Eyes**

... What do you see when you look at me?  
A Black Man right?  
The reason you clutch your bag  
or tighten your fist for a fight.  
The stealer of your virtue,  
that shadow lurking in the night.  
'He's dangerous! Watch Out!'  
I'm bound to be a stereotype.  
I mean look at me:  
My skin's too dark to exude light.  
My appearance is too masculine  
to appreciate a Woman's Life.  
There's no way I could  
Right?!  
...Right?  
The Fear in Her Eyes  
tells me this is what she believes.  
The Fear in Her Eyes  
tells me this was birthed from loins of which her fear was conceived.  
I will not tell you

that some of her dangers are not man made.  
There are people out there  
for which she has reason to be afraid.  
But I will tell you  
that I am not cut from that same cloth.  
I assure you  
I will not use your pain to get off.  
Actually I used to be like you,  
Afraid of the Black Man and what he could do.  
I didn't have a purse  
to clench when he came through  
but rather a body  
I felt was vulnerable too.  
What could that possibly mean to you?  
Well here I'll give you a clue...  
I'm not solely Black  
or solely a Man,  
I have Transgender Experience  
which changes my viewpoint, my stance.  
I know how it feels to be a woman and the stakes  
to be afraid of harassment and rape...  
I usually don't even speak of it  
for the fear is too great.  
I've been there before  
and that place really hurt  
and I never wore a mid-drift  
or a "skimpy" skirt.  
I transformed from there to here  
carrying an understanding of why your eyes hold such fear.  
I'm just here to say  
This Black Man is Not a Threat...

*Authenticity Claims.* Artists defined authenticity in one of two ways. The first was whether or not, to their knowledge, poets lived in a way that was congruent with what they spoke about in their poetry as revealed in the following section of my field notes:

... Lyrical Empress speaks about male poets performing her work without giving her credit, challenging and disrespecting her, sleeping around, and mistreating women. Upon asking her about a well-respected male artist she says that he is a "hoe" who has a bunch of children and has had relationships with some of her friends and not treated them well. I ask her how in an art form that is about



working through problems and finding ones' truths these men can talk about so many positive things such as social change, uplifting others, and bettering themselves, yet live the exact opposite lives of what they write about. She replies that the men write about what they want to be- not what or who they actually are.

Lexie also took issue with poets who pander to their audiences' desire for poems that uplift women in a patriarchal society (which she, like Lyrical Empress, felt was particularly evident among male artists), yet do not live by the creed they espouse on stage:

Um, and for some people I think you know you-you see the persona on stage is this super, you know- you see it a lot I think with-with men. I'm sure you see it with women, with men I think it's a lot more obvious because there's this whole like you know women are the world and I love you and you're this that and the third and their poems and then they step off stage and it's like what's happening behind the scene is very misogynistic or very um you know anti feminism and it's just that persona does well in front of an audience, but it's not- they're not beliefs that you walk with everyday. And not just men, I think women have their-their own things. I mean, I have my own things right that I'm sure are inconsistent with what I say, but I think that what you say can only go so far and like who you want to be, like that whole you know- the person on stage is my best self. Like no it can't be that far from your regular self. That's a problem if they are...(laughing) ...I mean I definitely think that with a with any performance right it it there's an extent to which- that character of that poet is-is being performed. There's performativity right? We, you-step on stage and-and that is- you know there's Lexie on stage and then off stage and-and they're different. Like they have to be. I think I look at just how different are they?

Erickson (1995:133-134) contends that inauthenticity occurs when ones' system of self-values is repeatedly contradicted by their words and/or actions across situations and identities; therefore, it is in this way that artists whose off stage behaviors repeatedly contradict the self-values promoted in their poetry come to be seen as inauthentic.

The second definition of authenticity centered on the notion of whether or not poets should only speak from their own life experiences. At one open mic, a poet

specifically stated in her poem that she didn't talk about the ghetto or other things she had not encountered. For her there seemed to be something inauthentic in writing about circumstances that one has not directly experienced. Sergio implicitly stated his feelings that poets should not talk about issues that haven't affected them in the following excerpt when asked if and how gender plays out at spoken word events:

I see a lot of instances um where a feminine poets er (slight laugh) female poets rather will talk about feminine issues. Um, especially dealing with a being discriminated against the sort of glass ceiling idea. Um, and how that's played a role in their lives. Uh, I've really never seen any male poets talk about it, which I dunno if that's just from a lack of experience. And I dunno if that's necessarily a bad thing since um, obviously (pause) a per- a spoken word poet is gonna be getting at issues that have impacted them in their lives and so if that's not an issue that I feel like men have experienced maybe then uh, it's not the case that they should be talking about that.

By mainly associating gender with femininity Sergio feels that women have an inherent right to discuss gender discrimination that men do not necessarily have. What is interesting is that in a discussion on race he appeared to contradict this belief stating:

Uh, one of the best poems on race that I read, er that was read while I was in high school, uh was about African Americans and the discrimination that they've witnessed- that this person had witnessed first-hand they weren't obviously- uh harmed by it because they were Caucasian, but they had witnessed it and sort of seen it from that side. Um, and like I said the-the the guy was Caucasian so it was it, I don't think you have to be a certain race in order to talk about race in spoken word...

Most artists seemed to agree that one did not necessarily have to experience something in order for their poetry to be viewed as valid and authentic. In fact, poets frequently spoke about poems inspired by others and/or a desire to lend their voice to those least heard in society as evidenced in the following excerpts by Lisa, Keith, and students from my spoken word poetry course:

Um, I have one on um- um how media portrayal of women of color affects society's perception of women of color and how that's... had a very negative impact on them... both of those poems were results of personal stories with friends and people I care about. Um, I have one on urban education based on the experiences of um kids I've led camp with. Um, so-so yeah I write about things that I've experienced or that I've seen and my message usually at the end is like this needs to change... to somebody who would say like if you haven't experienced it you shouldn't or can't write about it um I would kind of pose the question then if you've never experienced a certain problem are you in any way equipped to try and fight that problem? So if you didn't grow up in poverty are you equipped to try and fight poverty or not? Um, simply- I'd be curious to hear their answer. For *me*, I write about things I have a close personal connection with because those are things I'm moved to write things about and those are things I'm able to write about... Um, so that's just for me it's part of the writing process, it just doesn't come to me if I *haven't* lived it or if I *haven't* heard somebody's story...

...I um- listen a lot to you know what's happening in the world around me. Different people will tell me things and their stories just inspire me to write. Um, and I think some of it is a is a I have to do it- kinda thing, you know. There are some people in the world who are like, you know what this is my calling I have to do this. I feel like I just have to do it. Um emotionally, probably liberation for myself, helping with liberation of others from whether it's social bondage or mental bondage, but it's like a calling. It's a need- gotta do it. Um, but mostly inspired by people's stories... I've recently also gotten more into um writing poems a little bit more personal um and not necessarily about me, but they're about people I interact with. Um, so I've got a poem, one of my favorites right now, it's called mother of seven and it really is about the woman who has seven children that I met and her child was being beat by her father and uh, it's a *tough ugly* poem, but um so recently I've gotten into telling more stories about specific types of people, so yeah.

The last poem I wrote in class was one that was inspired by family. My entire life I have seen immigrants being disrespected and none of them had the chance to speak back. I wrote that poem as if I was an immigrant, because I wanted them to understand that they were not alone and someone understood them. I ended up sharing that poem with my parents and they agreed that no one had ever spoken up for them in that way.

After a semester I now understand how that can be done with poetry. When you have the freedom of speech you should use that at all times and use that voice for people that cannot use their own. Poetry is not always about telling your own story; it's about touching as many as people with your story.

In 2010 I watched a spoken word performance for the first time performed by Alysia Harris called “That Girl” and it really spoke to me. She was speaking on a subject that I could relate to and her performance always resonated with me. I honestly felt as though no one else could relate to what I was going through. I realized that was not her own experience, Alysia Harris used that poem to empower females that could have been feeling broken down.

### *Community*

I feel a great sense of community with other artists... in fact... it’s the strongest community that I have in my life. ~JBT



**Figure 17. Poets having lunch together at local cafe**

All of the poets I interviewed talked about feeling a sense of community with one another and regularly made references to the uniqueness of the D.C. poetry scene:

...D.C. is like, I don’t know if a lot of you guys know this, but like D.C. or like the DMV area D.C., Maryland, Virginia it is one of like *the* biggest and one of the best honestly -a poetry a- and arts scenes that I’ve seen like in the country. Like I’ve been to a lot of places around the country...and Canada...and um, yeah

like...this city definitely like got it...there's so many different type of art related things um that go down here...a lot of artists get their start um, here...

... We can't succeed unless we are a community... we have to have a community- if you don't stay together and grow together... like that's-that's just not gonna happen. Um... we-we won't get too far... I'm grateful for... the people in D.C. that paved the way for me... the people- the D.C. community that nurtured me. I wouldn't be where I am right now and I'm so grateful and feel so blessed that I'm now in a position that I can do that kind of similar thing and be something for the next generation for the next kids and-and youth, and-and even the adults, that I'm mentoring that will take over this and... create something even more beautiful.

... I love the art community here in Washington D.C. I don't know if you know how blessed you are to be here in D.C... (audience claps) Yeah give it up for that... one of the best art scenes... there is no competition alright. People come to D.C. they're amazed by how good the scene is and we don't have competition outside this area and the reason is there's no competition amongst us. We all know how important it is for the whole scene to be hot... you go anywhere any night of the week you see some hot shit there... this poetry scene, the art scene in general- but the poetry scene here is second to none... everywhere else you go in- in the country, not everywhere, but a lot of the places you go people are-are like trying to fight to get the same fans and are like are-are-are working against each other trying to build a fan base... but even before Political Poets this has always been a very tight knit community and I'm blessed to be a part of it...

... I am a collaborator. I am a team guy. I'm in a fraternity. I go stepping. I love brotherhood... Youknowwhati'msayin'... so collaborating is what I love. It's just um- read my cover letter to apply for this job [as an open mic host at Political-Poets]. It's completely about how much I love... the community that's here... I love seeing poetry grow... But um, the reason the D.C. scene is so strong is because we don't feel a sense of competition that way... it's a good scene youknowwhati'msayin'? There's places where I've gone and people where like, you know, everyone needs to know that 'I'm the best.' And in D.C. everyone needs to know that on any given night you can go *anywhere* and see good poetry, youknowwhati'msayin'? We make sure everyone knows that. And I love that...

... I am so lucky- I feel so lucky uh, to have landed here in Washington D.C. because it's just an incredible community here of poets and writers... that's what I wanted. That's what I needed. And I'm more social than some writers... I need community, but I think *all* poets um benefit strongly from community, but I in particular am someone who needs it- *badly*.

... like I think that one thing that I really like about D.C. is like it is very diverse and I think that like if you haven't read Yeats you're still okay, you know, like

you- like people get up and do whatever poem and that there's a wide variety obviously of like background and even education level maybe that's at least apparent right in the poems, but I love that that can all exist in one place. I'm not saying Seattle was like snotty in any way; I'm just saying that's what it kinda was. Um, so I think D.C.'s a lot more diverse and D.C. also has a LOT more going on...

A testament to the tight knit community, proclaimed by artists, was the high regard with which they spoke about one another. With the exception of Lyrical Empress (a Georgia based artist), not one D.C. poet had a negative thing to say about another artist. In fact, they often promoted one another's work and accomplishments with pride. When asked who their favorite poets were, almost every interviewee mentioned at least one local artist with whom they interacted. JBT named off a list of local artists saying:

My favorite spoken word artists... they're also all teaching artists that work with me and work with kids and what sets them apart is that they work with kids and that they use their art uh, not just for themselves and their own self promotion, but ta make a difference in their community. Um, and so I really appreciate that and that's kind of where I come from with it...

Poets also frequently touted one another's accolades when introducing them to the audience:

...last but not least our feature tonight um is actually the... Director of Poetry Events and uh, MASTER curator for Political Poets... I've know this brother for a long time... he's an amazing amazing brother... it's been a very humbling privilege to get to know him and have gotten to share art with him. Um, so please make some noise for Mr. Afram, who is the feature for tonight- make some noise!

While respect was fundamental to the familial feel of D.C. spoken word culture, there were six types of community-building techniques that synergistically worked to create and sustain it: setting the stage, small talk, humor, call and response, resource sharing, and perceived vulnerability.



Figure 18. JBT "setting the stage"

*Setting the stage-creating “safe” spaces.* Hosts are responsible for setting the stage and ultimately the tone of the night in a way that puts performers at ease and draws the audience in as active and reverent participants. Before the first performer came on stage, hosts would explain the community norms. The most commonly stated norm was ‘respect the mic’ explained by the following hosts:

The rules of tonight is that we ask everyone to please respect the mic. Um, uh do not talk so loudly that other people around you cannot hear the poet that is on the mic. The rules tonight are that you get five minutes only- no exceptions no um no extensions, do not turn your head and look at me and go ‘can I...’ I’m gonna say ‘hell no’ (some members of the audience laugh)...

... second rule uh, respect the mic, but even moreso respect the person that is at the mic... we may not always agree with what people are saying but we goin’ we goin’ let them have you know they five minutes... this is a place of love, uh this is a community space... you show ‘em love and um you know a-a-and continue to do that um, because it’s very hard for somebody to come up here and do their poem... some people might be getting’ up here for they first time... particularly difficult um to do a-a a heartfelt piece or any poem in front of a room full of strangers. You know, you don’t know what people are thinkin’ about you, sayin’ about you or how they gonna feel- you shy, you nervous so wanna show people as much love as possible. And if somebody, you know is saying somethin’ that is

blatantly super disrespectful, super you know racist or any of those you know isms... you just cross the line don't worry I got you- I will take care of that. I have no problem kicking someone off the stage for that.

Thus, respecting the mic referred to poets staying within allotted time limitations and refraining from disrespectful language as well as audience members keeping noise and side conversations to a minimum. Additional norms detailed by hosts included standardized responses and showing love to poets. The most common standardized responses were the “slow clap” and phrase, “Only five dollars!?” The slow clap was generally reserved for a poet that has gone over their time on stage or said something that could be construed as disrespectful:

... we wanna give a chance for everybody uh, that signed up on the list to be able to get up here and do something. And I really don't wanna slow clap you off the stage 'cuz that will happen. You see what I'm sayin'? ... you way past five minutes I'm just gonna start clappin', you know, and then Afram's gonna join in and start clappin' ... then you know other people in the room is gonna start joinin' in... we don't want that to happen... just come up here and do your thing get off you good...

...whatever you wanna say pretty much you're allowed to say BUT, if you step out of line, alright- we're gonna give the slow clap. You know about the slow clap? (Audience responds with an affirmative “umhum.”) ... let me hear the slow clap... that's how it goes down... this is a safe space... know that you can get checked... (audience laughs).

The “Only five dollars!?” phrase is stated in unison by the audience in an exclamatory and questioning tone after an artist states the price of their merchandise. While five dollars is the most common price, the phrase is used inserting whatever price the poet states e.g. “Only ten dollars!?” Below is an example of a poet explaining the norm to newcomers:



... the chapbook is five dollars (some of the audience responds in unison “Only five dollars!?”). Thank you. How many people have no idea what just happened (laughter ripples through the audience)? So... I’m gonna say it’s five dollars and you’re gonna go “Hhhh! Only five dollars!?” ... My chapbook is five dollars (audience responds in unison “Only five dollars!?”). Now when you’re in a D.C. poetry scene place you’ll know...

Showing love to poets was comprised of the audience clapping performers on and off the stage and vocalizing affirmative responses throughout their performances. The following are two examples of hosts explaining the concept to audience members:

... It takes a lot for somebody to get up here and say they poems or say they piece whatever they’re gonna say or do in front of a room full of strangers that they’ve never met... or for the most part probably they’ve never met um in their entire life. So we ask ya’ll to definitely, you know, respect the people that touch the stage, give ‘em a whole lotta love. Um, you know, we- we may not always agree on everything they doin’ and whatnot, but we definitely clap them on to the stage and clap ‘em off to the stage... we’re gonna be team clap for evvvrybody! ... BUT if you do hear somethin’ that you like, during a poem, what you can do is sometimes in the slam community and poetry community we snap for each other right, so we can snap – everybody snap right quick (audience snaps). Yes, a round of snaps. You can snap for someone, uh you can... say “Go in poet!” ... you can... do the uh chocolate uh stuck at the roof of your mouth sound; you can do a “mmmhhhhmmm”... everybody 1-2-3 just go “mmmhhhhmmm” 1-2-3 (audience makes the mmmhhhhmmm sound). Yeah, ooh shit ya’ll sound sexy (the audience laughs)... yeah man, so you can do all kind a things. Just anything that shows love to people when they on stage like “do that” -like ‘cuz it takes a lot to be up here... Just show everybody lots of love...

... last rule have fun ya’ll. Um it’s okay to get loose, you know, it’s okay to... get down... you know, respond. Give the people that are on stage energy they’ll give you energy right back... we show love to poets... um we like to do things... we can snap... we can clap... you can yell “Hallelujah!”... say “Go in poet!” ... show love to the people that are on stage...

These affirmative responses were also used when a poet was having trouble remembering a line or getting through an emotional poem. For example, one poet was struggling to finish her poem when an audience member encouraged her by calling out, “You got it!

Go ahead- take your time,” while other audience members lightly snapped their fingers or clapped. During her interview, Lexie credited these public showings of support—between the audience and poet—with creating “safe spaces,” saying:

...I think what you’re asking is... what makes an open mic or those kinds of poetry events a safe space? Um, and I wonder if to some extent it’s just the responsiveness right- you are people and you are *here*... That *we* are all here in this space at the same time and I know you can hear me and that if I sneeze you’re gonna say, “God bless you”- *even* if I’m on stage in a way that in other places um, maybe that fourth wall is just, just feels a lot thicker than I dunno, an open mic...

Hosts regularly talked about the significance of creating safe spaces; these were generally defined not as physical spaces, but rather those in which people respected the mic and showed love. The purpose of creating such spaces was for poets to feel they could speak freely without the fear of being judged, criticized, or ostracized:

... sometimes life- life is the poem, you know. Life is the poem and sometimes you just wanna come up here and... just say your piece... and it’s beautiful that we are able to create these spaces where we feel safe enough to come, even in a room full of strangers, and to speak our lives and know that we are receivin’ love and positive energy no matter where we come from... so I commend you for even being brave enough and courageous enough to come up here and say your story like that. Thank you, thank you for allowing us that privilege...that’s really amazing and very much appreciated...

... Political Poets is a fantastic fantastic beautiful space...we’re all about creating a safe space, a healthy space to have- you know, proper discourse uh, about the things that we see in this world and the challenges that we have... create... love and compassion and growth... within all of each other... and the community that we create from that, the friendship that we build, other people that we meet um, and a lot of times how that happens is something like this. Isn’t it crazy, that it’s like this is a place dedicated for people to speak- right? That there’s such a thing in this world where we create spaces for people to just express themselves...

*Small talk.* Small talk was demonstrated through the sharing of personal/biographical information, discussion of current events, and referencing or

commenting on poems that had been performed. Personal and biographical information was often shared by way of host introductions, poets prefacing their poems, and hosts chatting with the audience about recent events in their lives. The following is Guy's introduction of Afram:

...three interesting things... one, that he can type 50 wpm... that's pretty fast- I type 86, but that's fine (audience laughs)... Number two, he is a fulltime home-schooler, which is really really awesome... Yo, he tweeted this picture one time of him doing capoeira with his sons while they were reading... I was like Afram wins dad of the year. I was like I thought I was doin' somethin' with my child, but I was like nope you got it... dad of the year... Number three, he is a watermelon connoisseur... he loves watermelon- anything watermelon... he celebrates watermelon day... he's part of the national watermelon association (audience laughs)... which as an acronym is N.W.A. (audience laughs as the National Watermelon Association acronym is the same as the famous rap group Niggaz Wit Attitude)... and it's like a real thing. Apparently there's like a national association for every fruit and he's part of the National Watermelon Association (audience laughs). I was like motherfuckers ain't got shit to do with their lives (audience laughs)...anyway... without further ado... start clappin' right now... for your feature... Mr. Aframmmmm!!!!!!!

Without having met Afram, after hearing his introduction audience members might feel a connection to him as parents, home-schoolers, martial artists, or fruit lovers. While Afram's introduction provided basic details and fun facts about his life, much like what might be seen on a public profile, Jane's poem preface revealed some very personal information about her family:

Um, you'll hear in the poem that uh, on my daddy's side I'm descended from southern white folk- obviously um (audience laughs)... yeah- uh- I know kinda shocking. Um, and they were slave owners. And that's kind of a trippy legacy um and it's always shocking- it's shocking that people are shocked when I say I'm descended from slave owners because somebody's gotta be- you know. White folks weren't all abolitionists (audience laughter) turns out... So any- yet that is a history that white people would very much like to pretend doesn't exist. Um, as we've seen in recent uh days. Um, as always. Um, so I think just naming that-that fact uh is often a revolutionary act. Um, but it's just a first step...

Though not as revealing as the information shared by Jane, Guy joked about gender norms and his love for cuddling while hosting one evening:

...guys really do like to cuddle thought like it's it's-it's a thing... you don't like to cuddle? No? Everybody like to cuddle? Nah, I met some mutherfuckers that don't like to cuddle they're all like uh uh- what you doin'? This is my space- yooooou over *there* (audience laughs). I'm here- you over there. We can still watch Netflix the screen is big enough, you fine (laughter)... *SHiiiit* – it's fucked up...

Guy also shared his new year's resolution:

...is everybody getting' around to their resolution or whatever or their changes- so far? It's only 14 days in, but you know... don't do like last year 'cuz you know what happened last year (audience laughs) you know what happened. Yeah, I just decided this year to just be a better person- that was kinda it, you know, for me just like just be a better person- not be fucked up to people ...'cuz people are fucked up, a lot of people- just- people do fucked up shit and it just amazes me sometimes...

Through the regular sharing of small bits of information, audience members may come to feel as if they know a great deal about hosts and performers, even without having ever personally met them.

The discussion of current events and popular culture also served to bond audiences:

... shout out please to um the brilliant and the genius soul of a Amiri Baraka who just passed (audience claps)... a pioneer in the black arts movement... I had the humbling privilege to have met him back in 2008... he was truly inspiring... big shout out to him. Big shout out to James Avery... who played Uncle Phil on the Fresh Prince of Bell Air (audience claps)... one of the best played like black guys on TV like ever... that scene of him and Will when Will's father like didn't come back (audience begins talking and reenacting scene) Son! Son! I know me-me and my homies like we were watching Fresh Prince re-runs one time and that episode came on. We just like in the room just-just like four dudes just balling (laughing) ... "My dad didn't come back neither man... Uncle Phil love me right now." Man it was-it was just fucking ridiculous...

By speaking about the passing of two well-known artists, and reenacting a scene from a highly popular television series, audience members were encouraged to reminisce together—sharing a moment of nostalgia. Again, without having necessarily personally participated in the dialogue, audience members were able to take part in a shared experience. Another way that this occurred was through hosts, and less commonly poets, commenting on performances throughout the night:

... man that shit was so real... “To fuck you or get coffee”-like that’s (audience laughs)... that’s like gonna be my mantra for the rest of the week (audience laughs)... Like you just had that moment ... aww man, I can do that, but I should probably get coffee (audience laughs) Yeeeah. Then you end up getting coffee after doing that, so (audience laughs)...

Give it up, Give it up, Give it up, Give it up make some noise for Naliyahhhh!!! (audience cheers and claps). Girrl you don’t even sound like you lost your step [referencing the fact that I’d made a comment about not performing in years] you good-you got it...

...mmhhmm mmhhmm “Make love to your mind girl” (audience laughs). Penetrate your thoughts (audience laughs)- consensually of course- consensually of course- of course-of course- aww man and then he got all... she chokin’ me (audience laughs)...

Commenting on performances demonstrated that the performer was actively listened to and often united the host, performers, and audience through the formation of inside jokes that only they were privy to.

*Humor.* Humor was a staple in the D.C. poetry scene. Hosts kicked off open mic events and created a sense of camaraderie throughout the night by making the audience laugh:

I host fifth Thursdays here... so if you like me you can come back and see me... I'll be featuring in July. If you don't like me, you can come and boo (audience laughs)... A couple of rules we're gonna go over- uh, first thing, please uh silence your cell phones- put 'em on vibrate... self gratification something that just doesn't make noise 'cuz it's not cool- somebody's up here doing a very heartfelt poem about how they lost their grandmother and then all you hear out of nowhere is "yeah I love strippers." That is not cool (audience laughs) not at all...

... I tried to do youth poetry slam um, during the civil war (laughter in audience). Um, I was with Harriet Tubman and a slam was a way to keep everyone entertained as we went to the North Star (audience laughter). That's why there was a three minute time limit um, I did not start that, but that's just why that happens (audience laughter)... I'm Mickey, I'm single and available, so if you have- (audience cheers) Thank you. If you have a brother, an uncle, a great great grandfather- or someone that drives a ice cream truck (whispers) I'm there (audience laughter). Or if someone has air conditioning 'cuz I live in D.C. and that humidity is a killer...

... Lions and Tigers and Bears (audience calls out "Oh My!")... I wanna talk about a few things I want and change for 2014. Number one- this whole thing about the knock out kids -ya'll heard about that? It's a thing it's like 2-200 teenagers coming to you from the front or the back trying to knock you out with one blow! If you try to knock me out with one blow - it better work (audience laughs). 'Cuz if it don't, I'm comin' after your ass with the MMA, the UFC, the WWE, the WTF- and everything else in the alphabet soup... kickin' some ass. I'm showin' you everything Mr. Miyagi taught me I'm waxin' on and I'm waxin' off (audience laughter). Number two, airports- we're far enough removed from nine eleven where you should be able to crack a joke in the airport, alright. I was in the airport the lady was checkin' my bag. I said if you find anything illegal in there it's not mine (audience laughs). She said well... who is it for? I said beats me you ever heard of the Virgin Mary she had a whole baby and didn't know where it came from (audience laughs). She wanted to laugh just like you just laughed (audience laughs), but she couldn't because of all that shit. Let's get off that... Ladies for 2014 I want ya'll to ask a different first date question- ya'll askin' the same stupid-ass question- you know what it is? So why aren't you dating anyone [mimicking a feminine voice] (audience laughs). Well first of all I thought I was (audience laughter). I mean I don't know what you call this - if you're not enjoying yourself we could try something else, but you know - don't ask that shit- what you're trying to get at by asking someone why they're not already in a relationship is - to find out if they're fucking crazy... who finds a good thing and asks why it's not somebody else's good thing... you know how you see a fifty dollar bill on the ground and be like that sucks- why aren't you already in somebody's wallet (audience laughter)? ...

... 2013 um has been an incredible year for me. Uh, I got married (audience cheers and claps)... just want you to know uh, that I love you. Where'd she go? She left?! (audience laughs) Oh my god. Never mind then – you knowwhati'm sayin' I was about to have a moment with her in front of everybody, but now she... fucked that up (audience laughs)...

...Haiku! Okay Haiku! Haikus real quick Haiku! Whoever said that black don't crack ain't never seen nobody black on crack. Yo-yo-yo I got one! I got one! I hate haikus 'cuz I need more than 17 syllables today (audience laughs). Hey you, over there. Yeah you, counting syllables. I make my own rules biatch (audience laughs)! Making love is like eating gummybears- start with head then do the rest (audience laughs and says, "ohhhh!")

Whether in small talk or the poetry itself, poets also wove humor into their time on stage.

To quiet the crowd D'Andre jokingly asked, "Ya'll listening?" He then proceeded to explain, "I'm just checking. I teach eighth grade science all day so I deal with mutherfuckers who don't listen all day... (audience burst out laughing). So I just be liking to know that on my free time mutherfuckers is actually listening– that's all..."

Naya also joked with the audience during her feature performance asking the people in the front row if they were awake, then saying, "I'm just making sure. I know sometimes I'm six foot one and I'm standin' right in front of ya- ya might be a little bit intimidated, but don't be- we're family right?" Prior to saying this Naya humored the audience by talking about what she referred to as "the love" of her life:

Krispy Kreme doughnuts at fourth grade birthday parties, it was the Grands buttermilk biscuits that made me tardy. Can't count the number of McDonalds' apple pies I ate—143 pounds in the third grade and they- (imitates the chorus of Amy Winehouse's song "Rehab" exchanging the word Rehab for fat camp) they tried to make me go to fat camp, and I said no, no, no (audience joins in singing the 'no's' clapping and laughing). My mother told me at a very young age that if I had a kid she'd kick me out of her house, so I—clever, locked up my legs and threw away the key, replaced my desire for sex with a fascination for TV... and now I'm delusional 'cuz I taste big Angus burgers on the train—smell Subway... and I think Tony the Tiger just winked at me... and I'm starting to

believe Aunt Jemima's really a part of my family (audience laughs heartily). My friends keep telling me I need help for this... I go to movie theaters just for the popcorn, I, I sneak slices of... bread instead of porn...

Throughout her poem Naya joked about a something most people can relate to—an affinity for certain foods. Almost everyone at one point or another has wanted to eat their favorite food so much they could taste it. This poem instantly drew the audience into Naya, giving her their undivided attention. Poets also often poke fun at themselves by imitating poet stereotypes such as: the beatnik poet, the overly socially conscious poet (who screams and yells and repeats the same phrases three times in a row to make their poem seem “deep”), or the “poetry voice” as Naya did in her next poem. She began by asking the audience, “You know what a poetry voice is... even if you’re not a poet?—that, that stereotypical poetry voice?” Then, using her best “poetry voice” she read her poem, exaggerating and making fun of the stereotypical spoken word artist image of an overly spiritual and optimistic African American individual who has “natural” hair styled in an afro, twists, dreadlocks, braids, or cornrows that has come bearing knowledge:

I want tooo close my eyeees (audience member can be heard saying “you know she’s right”)... I want tooo close my eyeees, lay back and listen to hip hop that’s so smooth—watch rap videos without becoming angry... think of love without growing impatient... rewrite the Bible and watch the world—smile (audience bursts out laughing). And I could accept the parts of femininity I try to forget, peel off my fingernails, grease my scalp, light a candle burn some incense and play my favorite D’Angelo CD (audience laughing) and all because, that’s exactly what you’d expect me to say. [Stopping the “poetry voice” she continues] Everywhere I go people are always asking me if I’m a poet- and my first thought is—it’s my hair right? (Naya’s hair is in Senegalese twists, the audience laughs knowingly). But I respond, hell yeah I’m a poet—that’s right playahaters I’m sensitive (audience laughs)! I spent countless hours thinking of poignant ways to express and articulate all the messed up stuff humans feel—turning our garbage into beauty, our confusion into clarity, our anger into excitement, our boredom into big-city passion, our 50 cent is Idris Elba... (a girl hollers “our Whoo!” as other women laugh and clap)... a mastermind of metaphor... it all started with



dreams of microphones and turntables, skylines and skyscrapers... light to people just like me, eager to listen—be taken out of their individual world, and for three minutes or however long it takes me to finish a poem- they become a part of my community, a family dancing in sync to the dj's rhythm...

At the end of the poem Naya specifically points out that poetry itself, regardless of what it is about, is what unites consumers; it is the common denominator they all share. As fun loving and supportive as the spoken word community can be, no “family” is without their problems.

A long-standing joke within the spoken word community is voiced by Lyrical Empress in the following quote, “Don’t date no poet because they will ream you.” During her workshop Lyrical Empress spoke about the propensity for poets to use their art as a means of public retaliation through an example of a failed relationship between two poets she knew. She explained that because a poet felt extremely hurt by the actions of his former girlfriend, he wrote a poem called “Ass Tissue,” equating the way she treated him to how people use toilet paper and now, every time he performs the poem she and anyone else who knows about their former relationship, knows the poem is about her. It is not uncommon for people to perform poetry pieces about recent breakups, past loves, former friends, or foes. The audience can serve as a source of camaraderie cheering the poet on as they describe the wrongdoings of others or “poetically diss” them:

Actual messages I’ve received on OKCupid.com. 1. “We should hook up,” after I say I’m not interested in meaningless sex. “I never said that it had to be meaningless or even that it had to happen right away.” 2. “I only share info with women who don’t engage in friendship with males only little girls have male friends.” Good luck... 3. “Hey, my name is Dave, you came up as one of my... matches which must mean that you’re sexually open – hypersexual. I’m looking for a sex partner to explore with – rape fantasies... group sex... I think you’re very attractive and have just the look I’m into. I think we should meet this weekend for some... let me know if you’re down and we can take it from there.” I replied

hmm let's see meet up with a total stranger who has literally no information on his profile who's into rape fantasies... 5-roughly 33... "Wanna have a threesome?" 34. After telling him that I don't give my phone number to people before meeting them. "That's okay...the overly cautious and I don't really match." 35. While trying to arrange a first meeting he says, "I'm going to a friends house tonight I am thinking I could come over afterwards." I replied... that's bold, look don't take this the wrong way, but I don't actually know you. I try to avoid meeting people in person for the first time at my home because of rape... coffee or a museum maybe we could do one of those things sometime in the next week. He replied, "Well I'm not interested in raping anyone. Next week sounds far and coffee doesn't sound as fun as cuddling." Congratulations, I officially think you're a rapist...

Another way in which humor was employed was by poking fun at serious topics such as stereotypes, gentrification, paternalism, race, and cultural appropriation:

I have a confession. I have this insatiable addiction to coffee- fair trade coffee, fair trade coffee and NPR membership... (audience laughter). I wanna wake up with that smell next to me... and freshly pressed new Yorker and mole skin covers and sweaty yoga mats. See the truth is- I'm a snow queen. I just have this- this thing for white people (audience laughter). Can't help it. It's the way they eat steak for dinner (audience laughter). I know I am a vegetarian, but I would make an exception (throughout performance the white men sitting on the stage seating appear visibly uncomfortable). I've heard that white men... I've heard that they're *really good* at gentrification (audience laughter)... a white woman asked me where I was from- no where I was really from (audience laughter). She told me she was going to India for a non-profit that year and I said oh – tell me more (audience laughter). Oh –take me with you (audience laughter). The first white boy I ever slept with was sooo excited when I told him he was sexy, like I was the first person to say that like ever (audience laughter) in the entire world. You have to understand- I like it that way (audience laughter)- like your veins are showing, like your skin could bleach out your clothes (audience laughter), like your SPF level is 9000 (audience laughter), like white – it just turns me on. Like I would love to cuddle in the ugliest sweaters with you and listen to David Siberian... run in Brooklyn share the same K shaped constellations together at night (audience laughter). I want you to pick me up on your way home from your unpaid internship (audience laughter). I wanna jam in your Prius to your hip hop. I want you to tell me about your gap year (audience laughter). I wanna map the lines on your palms to the lines you drew Africa (audience laughter). I wanna get my name tattooed on your arm in Sanskrit and then in Chinese (audience laughter). I want us to make black friends together (audience laughter). I want us to have brunch with them. I wanna get gay married in San Francisco and pickup our tribal print tuxedos at American Apparel (audience laughter). I wanna vote for Obama

with you (audience laughter) and name our ethnically adopted cat... on our wedding night you will tell me about all the women of color artists that make you feel like a diva such as Beyonce (cheering in the audience) and you will awkwardly gyrate me without your hips (laughter). When we go couch surfing for our honeymoon you will pull me aside and take nude photos of me like that time you randomly selected me from the airport security line (audience says, “ohhh”). I loved that (laughter) and you will whisper tenderly in my ear don’t worry I’m not racist like them then fuck me like you are (laughter cheering clapping)!

In a lighthearted satirical way the poet addressed microaggressions and troubled well-meaning white culture’s infatuation with that which is different or exotic. Many of the audience members appeared to relate with the material as evidenced by their laughter, cheering, and applause. Therefore the poetry created a feeling of connection—between members of the audience and the performer—by revealing shared experiences, beliefs, and values.

The community poem was another way the audience, performers, and host fostered a sense of togetherness. For many open mics, the community poem is a tradition and read to close out the evening. Guy describes the concept of the community poem in the following excerpt:

...one thing that we also do here at Political Poets uh, we have this thing called the potluck poem... community poem so what’s gonna happen is this clip board I’m gonna pass it around and hopefully it will get to everybody that’s in this room and you’re each gonna write something... you can write a full line; you can write just a word. It doesn’t have to rhyme. It doesn’t have to go with the last line or last word that was before yours. We’re just gonna kind of create our own story out of this and at the end of the night I’m gonna read this community poem and we’re all gonna give it a standing ovation and clap for it because we’re all fucking awesome people, which means that this poem is gonna be fucking awesome right. Cool. So, ummm first line of the community poem- uh, somebody give me an animal – (audience calls out animals)... lionfish? It’s a thing? You can eat it? Alright lionfish... what’s the lionfish’s profession? (audience calls out occupations) stockbroker for what? ...you said for pantyhose? What? (laughter) He’s a stockbroker for [hair] weaves and pantyhose (laughter)... so that’s the first line of the poem – of the community poem- let’s keep that goin’...

Community poems often evoke laughter from the audience due to silly prompts, funny lines and the inflections, intonation, and comments of the host reading it:

The lionfish, who was a stockbroker for weaves and panty hose, uh, has the hope- the hope is with feathers flying away paradise. Love is an illusion we fancy when alone. Fuck bitches get money (laughter)... what if there's too many bitches and not enough money? (laughter)... what if all your love pains are champagne – (Host says, “What? Okay.”) or what about when your waiter forgets to give change... or what if my piss comin’ back dirty (laughter)? ... I’m just being honest- like really what if (Host says, “Yo- this is a serious question!?” audience laughs)? But none of that matters to lionfish... yes I love the strippers, but the lion fish she just keeps... simply be happy because you see she was an artist not a bitch or a hoe. She knew that black is beautiful and it’s hard out here for a lion fish (laughter- host says, “It’s funny how like the lionfish was first kinda like gender neutral and like had no race ...the lionfish is a black woman” more laughter...) ... snitches get stitches you know this. Yeah, but shout out to all the pretty ladies though. I am soo over you and your bitch ass like how did I not see your bitchassery like...(Host says, “Okay somebody gonna get fucked up after Political Poets- I’m sorry...” laughter “It’s-it’s getting’ real”) ... to the girl who went first, have you completed someone else’s soul because I’m willing to take the fall and... after this show (audience says, “Whoooo”) ...You don’t care obviously because you let me walk away. Sorry just had a breakup- (Host says, “Wait like now!? Like... a minute ago?” laughter)... back to lion fish. Beyonce is my spirit animal (laughter)...The beauty and the support that is tonight is lovely, yet unfortunately so unusual...

*Call and response.* The most significant role of the audience, outside of listening, is to collectively provide energy to artists. In the following excerpt a new poet reflects on a performance in which they felt the energy from the audience was lacking:

...poetry and spoken word is as much about the audience as it is about the words being heard by them. I enjoy when the humor and the depth of our poems have more call-and-response. I love that we heard after that people really liked the show and people signed up for the class. However, while we were there I needed more energy responding back. I also wonder how much that has to do with the performance of the piece as well and unwritten rules of listening to performance poetry. The snap is a common sign of affirmation, so when people don’t snap does that mean that what you said wasn’t as deep as you thought or that it was so

deep that people weren't able to respond as they treaded through the rest of the poem. I don't really know in the moment so I keep moving and hope that I made an impact.

In order to keep a high level of energy and excitement throughout the night, a form of call and response, between the host and audience, is almost always present. Hosts each had their own ways of incorporating call and response. Guy liked to start off open mics with call and response directives and area checks:

...if you can hear the sound of my voice clap once (audience claps once). If you can hear the sound of my voice clap twice (audience claps twice, as talking dies down). Ladies and gentlemen and all gender binaries in between, if you're in the building say, "Oh yeah!" (audience responds "Oh, yeah!")... on the count of three I need you to make as much noise as possible for 2013 'bout to be mutherfukin' over! 1-2-3 (audience screams, cheers, claps, and whistles).

...area check... Maryland in the building? (cheering in audience)... D.C. in the building? (cheering in audience) V.A. in the building? (loud cheering) nah, nah, nah fuck that (audience laughter)... we got the South in the building? Anybody from the south? North cackalacky? (some cheering) North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Texas...South Carolina...Midwest in the building? ...Where you from? (audience member replies, "Chicago")... I love Chicago if I weren't living in D.C. I would be livin' in Chicago. I fucking love Chicago... Chicago is amazing... We got the west coast in the building? (very loud cheering) Ya'll in deep in this mutherfucker (audience laughter). California? (more cheering) Yeah? What part of Cali?... L.A.? L.A.'s cool I like the Bay though... L.A. is cool... L.A. is dope... but I fuck with the Bay man... any New Englanders? (Cheering)... We got New York in the building? (Cheering and someone shouts something, then laughter) See what I'm sayin? (audience laughter) Ya'll mutherfuckers *always* in the building (audience laughter). It don't matter- it don't fuckin' matter – mutherfucker be in New Zealand talkin' about... New York in the building? Bup! bup! bup! bup!... (audience laughter) It don't fuckin' matter. There's somebody from Brooklyn somewhere in your vicinity at all times (audience laughter). It doesn't matter...I love Broolyn shout out to BK...

Another call and response technique Guy used to involve the audience was what he termed "either ors." He would give the audience two choices and they would individually



Afram and Jimmy used interactive songs and poems to engage the audience.

Afram employed a more traditional approach, having audience members say/sing particular lines of his song, while Jimmy did improvisational poetry:

... Um, what I'd like to do now is uh what I call a three word poem – that is free style spoken word, unwritten, unscripted, unmemorized- totally improvisational – and I'm'a need ya'll to make this a uh-uh interactive type of thing okay. So when you see me do like this (points at audience) – that means I need you- somebody, anybody, everybody to shout out a word and I will grab it out of the air and put it in the poem- alright... I need a word (people call out words- laughter). ... I heard freedom (audience laughter as no one said the word freedom). This poem is called "Freedom." Free- dom is way easier to get than expensive intelligence... (audience laughter). ... Five minutes of my life was when I lost my virginity (audience laughter)- with the Virgin Mary. We go way back, to the hay stack. I mean the manger. I mean she's my manager. She books me gigs in churches, but I'm Jewish. Give me your (people call out words) anal beads, but only after they've been disinfected (audience laughter). Disenfranchised youth are everywhere. Let's bring them under the tent and give them something to believe in like bigfoot. Bigfoot is out there when you see him be scared (audience laughter)... have you ever seen a bald yeti? No? Not yet? He will be here later tonight. He looks a lot like me... you burp and say, "Excuse me, use me, but don't give me (audience call out words) diarrhea (audience laughter) or I might die area code purple... infinity never stops spinning. Hip-hop won't stop. It goes to the tick tock. I won't stop, who has the (audience calls out words) what did you say? Who has the what? (audience calls out words) Who has the snuggie? (audience laughter) Who has the snuggie? My back is hot as shit...

*Resource sharing.* Artists placed great importance on the sharing of resources in the forms of networking and collective economic practices. Lyrical Empress gave examples of people opening their homes to her while she was performing far from home. She said that poets generally provide for each other pooling and sharing resources, so having money to travel for performances is never an issue. It is not uncommon for an "offering" to be taken up, as was done at several of the open mics—to fund the travel

expenses of feature performers since they are usually not paid. If a poet has merchandise, such as a CD or chapbook, hosts will often assist in promoting the items throughout the night. A common practice by hosts was to offer their own merchandise for free or a discounted price if audience members purchased items from an out of town featured poet to help offset their travel expenses. Another way poets shared resources was through recommending one another for various—particularly paid—opportunities such as facilitating classes and workshops or being a featured performer at an event. Additionally they would suggest one another for awards and media coverage. This sentiment of helping “your fellow man” out was articulated well by one of the open mic hosts:

... when it really shakes out—it is about helping your fellow man. It is about calling up Jessica, who I know, and saying... yeah you can come be a feature... and then you hook up somebody else and somebody else hooks up somebody else... You have to look at it how can I help folks, ‘cuz really that’s all that life is about... how do you get what you want- by helping other people get what they want. If you want to be successful in life, you help other people get what they want...

The dedication to assisting others also played out during an open mic I was hosting, as demonstrated in my field notes:

Throughout the night a couple of students associated with one of the literature magazines on campus asked if they could come on stage to announce their upcoming open mic event. After receiving approval from the main organizer of the open mic I turned the stage over to them to promote.

I also personally experienced this phenomenon in my interactions with Keith and JBT. I originally asked a colleague of mine (who was a friend of Keith) to lead a paid workshop at a university we both worked at. Unable to accept an honorarium due to her university position, she quickly put me in touch with Keith who could receive payment. Similarly, I suggested that JBT (who assisted me with breaking into the D.C. poetry scene) teach a



follow-up course to my spoken word class, training college students to be high school poetry slam coaches with his organization. There was interest in the course and he is currently being paid to teach it.

*Perceived vulnerability.* As mentioned previously in relation to hosts and audience members, an instant feeling of closeness or familiarity with one another may occur due to the self-divulging nature of open mics. An audience member may feel a bond of sorts with an artist because they are able to relate to a situation, struggle, or feeling expressed by the artist. Such perceived shared experiences could allow individuals to look past the fact that they are otherwise strangers. Poets frequently talked about sharing personal information specifically to connect with their audiences:

... if I'm on stage performing it's important for me to have a narrative involved because I think others in the audience will connect to it. And if it's coming from me they know it's... serious... I've got a couple of poems where I mention my father was a drug addict. I've got other poems where I mention that my father was also a minister. Um, but there are moments when I mention stories about my family life and I do that because again I think it's a matter of engaging the audience...

... when you see the purpose of spoken word poetry is to connect or to inspire or to um... maybe connect is the best word. I don't... know that you can do that through generalities. I-I think that's you know, counter whatever any poem does uh, in any, in any place. You need experience and you need specificity. Um, I also just think that being vulnerable on stage and being your most honest self is the thing that every poet should- should do. You have to write through honesty, you have to write from discomfort, at least that's the philosophy I'm working through right now. I don't know if that's always what it's gonna be or that it always has been, but for me it's very important to think about what *don't* I want to say, um and that's probably the thing you have to say. Um, because it's the thing that most people think and are too afraid to express. And that's probably what connects us the most and the facet of humanity that's not a façade.

... just hearing personal stories made me feel connected. There's a book called Daring Greatly by Brene Brown. She talks about vulnerability and how no one wants to be vulnerable, and how lack of vulnerability is like this heavy armor that protects you but at the same time weighs you down and prevents meaningful connection. In this class I (and everyone else, I'm sure!) was able to shed this armor to make these meaningful connections.

... all artists want an audience-I think... there's something that happens at a *live* event that is different from anything else. And I think that's why even with um, you know, the gross- the explosive growth-gross of poetry online people still come out for events... the open mic that they run every month is sold out every month 115 seats and uh, costs five dollars and... kids have to pay and they just turn out in droves; they sold out every month... even- our other events are always packed as well. So um, and I think the audience is growing. So and-and it's because of the magic that happens um... person-to-person and that you can't get watching the video... there is a connection that we crave and um, so- that's why this moment is such a strange and interesting one with people spending so much time on their devices umm, but also craving the different kind of intimacy that happens in the live- uh- in the live setting... and the sort of idiosyncratic unexpected thing that might happen... I love reading- giving readings. Um, it's a chance to hear the poem- hear it sort of reflected back to you.

In addition to seeking a connection with their audience, poets made reference to feeling a sense of relief, freedom, and liberation from sharing personal stories:

... I initially wrote about topics that I felt passionate about, but it wasn't until very recently that I started writing about myself in a more personal way. I actually wrote an entirely new poem for the practicum because this new poem showed more vulnerability and I wanted to push myself to share (in front of a large audience!) something vulnerable about me. When I wrote my first vulnerable poem, I really had to push myself to write and reveal those vulnerabilities. But once I did, I felt liberated.

Afram keenly notes however, that such feelings of liberation may be dependent on a perceived degree of anonymity:

... I've always prided myself on not having my business out there, so one of the reasons maybe I didn't share so much is because I can't go anywhere in D.C. where I don't know someone. Youknowwhati'msayin'? Maybe I need to write all this shit about my divorce and go to New York, go to Chicago -where no one knows who I'm talking about.

### *Poetry as a Form of Activism*

Political Poets is a community where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted... a place to take a deliberate pause and feed your mind, body and soul... a space for art, culture and politics to intentionally collide... we believe that by creating such a space we can inspire social change and begin to transform our community and the world. ~Political Poets Tribal Statement

For many artists, poetry is a form of activism used to educate, organize, protest, and/or incite change. Russell Simmons (Williams, Hunter, Perler, and Gable 2014) suggests that improving society starts with acknowledging some of the ugly realities artists express, "... poets have been criticized for telling us our truth. Instead of dodging it we have to look at it and see it as a roadmap to... cure some of [our] societal ills..."

Within the <sup>2</sup>figured world of spoken word, the truth is allowed to be malleable and fluid—without compromising itself—and is primarily defined as that which results from

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<sup>2</sup> Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, and Cain (1998:52-53) define figured worlds as "... socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others... These collective "as-if" worlds are sociohistoric, contrived interpretations or imaginations that mediate behavior and so, from the perspective of heuristic development, inform participants' outlooks... A figured world is formed and re-formed in relation to the everyday activities and events that ordain happenings within it."

examining the self and society in relation to systems of power and inequality. Much like Paulo Freire's <sup>3</sup>'culture circles' open mic communities are a space to unearth and share truths by exchanging ideas in an attempt to clarify situations and explore possibilities for action. In the following passages Jane and Keith explain the role spoken word can play in exposing and fighting systems of oppression:

... it [art] can help us understand our world. It can help us name injustices... spoken word has a long tradition of doing that and a strong one. So that we see things like the manipulation of women's bodies for profit that we have- we are so inundated with and swim in uh the-the air we breath... that it becomes invisible. Um, and so it wakes us up- to those kinds of injustices... and then it can help us imagine alternatives... it can help us understand our past and how our past um influences our present... I think poetry in general has a special role in that it uses one of the tools that is used against us- language... which is used by government propagandists to um, try to get us to... believe that their way is the only way- that there is no alternative. Um, and it's used by uh corporate world to manipulate us into being essentially passive consumers... so that we don't question either their, you know, marketing tactics- the way they've taken control of our electoral process and the way they are just devastating our environment- our earth.

You know what I tell people is I consider poetry a form of advocacy right... I think that poetry is without a doubt a way to give voices to a *lot* of social problems... and perhaps also a way to give voices to solutions as well... I feel

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<sup>3</sup> Freire and his colleagues launched 'culture circles' comprised of coordinators rather than teachers, dialogues in lieu of lectures, group participants rather than pupils and in place of syllabi, "compact programs that were "broken down" and "codified" into learning units (Freire 1976:42). Culture circles were created in opposition to schools, which they saw as passive institutions. The culture circles "attempted through group debate either to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification" (Freire 1976:42).

like that is my form of activism.

Unlike traditional education spaces—which reproduce social stratification—spoken word purposely carves out room for marginalized voices, serving as a literacy mechanism and form of agency. Aware of poetry’s ability to evoke emotions, activist artists often craft emotionally charged performances around particular social problems that are designed to inform listeners of specific incidents, deliver messages, and serve as calls to action:

... there are very specific things that I call for... demanding the government do something, talking directly to congress or the president- the things like that... I talk more and more now about Israel and Palestine and um, as a Jewish American like that’s-that’s a big issue for me... I’m very pro-Palestinian and-and my a lot of my Jewish peers uh have a problem with that. And so... uh, a lot of what I’m pushing for-is for dialogue and um acceptance of others... but also an end to all violent conflict and releasing of political prisoners...

... a lot of times I call on individuals to change how they interact with others or urge them to get involved in the... political process.

... I hope that my future poems will be a form of social agitation and cultural resistance. Um, I want them to be articulations of wounding and I want to light a fire under people and have them realize ‘oh my god- we need to do something... there’s pain and we gotta do something...’

My stuff on stage I think tends to, even if they’re personal, they have an edge of being more for a public- they know they’re for the public I think. I write those poems with an understanding of someone is going to hear this and there’s probably a belief that they have and so I am actively working to either reinforce or work against that belief... I’m trying to persuade to some extent.

... the goal of most performance is to engage the audience. You want to connect them whether it’s a story, or a narrative or the theme and the emotional content connect them... umm and the other piece or aspect would be a uhh you want them to *feel* something- right. Um, in one of my poems I say, you know something about whether or not I pissed you off or convinced you to change the world- right. Like there’s... I think not a responsibility- but there’s something that a performance poet has where you can affect people- like if you really say something and and leave and people feel really empowered and go out and save the world or you can like really piss someone off make them sad and they might

harm themselves. I mean jus- the power of language there is important.

Um, like any art form the purpose is to connect with uh the-the listener, the watcher, the- whoever... and to give them some sort of emotional connection to it- to inspire them um- to make them *feel* whatever way the-the poet determines them to feel. Um, other people have used it for other purposes, but I wouldn't say that's what *the* purpose is... there are many purposes that other people use, you know. I use it as a community organizing tool; I use it as a fundraising tool; I use it as a way to have fun with my friends like, but *the* purpose like any art is to um, you know, a get-get an emotional response out of-out of the listener... so a lot of times I have a um an opinion or perspective that I wanna get out there and I wanna-I wanna push. Um, one of my first big uh breakthroughs or whatever um performing on stage was an antiwar piece um around the invasion of Iraq um and the audience really loved it and they asked me to continue performing it um so there's a there's a lot of political stuff that inspires me... I feel like it's not just entertainment we need to be doing something with it and so I use it to um-to... to try to make an impact on the audience. To-to try to make a difference. To have someone hear that poem and think about an issue differently or to think about their own behavior differently...

One of the most powerful performances I witnessed was an intense piece about the brutal beating death of Chicago teen Derrion Albert. Prior to performing it, the artist told the audience that he usually brings a two-by-four prop and prefaced the poem by explaining that, "in the video [of the murder] there's a part where somebody yells out 'put that nigga to sleep'... so that's where that line comes from." The following is a passage from his poem:

Put that nigga to sleep! Put 'em to sleep! Get him! Get him...! Put that nigga to sleep! tragedy, copied and pasted we just wasted, everyday wasted—over gang affiliations, territory, colors, what set you claim—young warriors, inner-city soldiers who were never taught to love each other... brothers who should have been on their buddy list—instead they playin' Vice Lords, Folks, Bloods and Crips—gangsta male, g-mail they could be puttin' brothers in boxes—we click on in-boxes to read the story, no one really gets the message, no attachment included. We throw away lives in a matter of seconds, human life deleted quicker than junk mail—the virus is in our minds... another black male in our subject line. Chicago honor student Derrion Albert now dead at the age of 16—this year—September '09, nah this ain't Columbine, this time—it's that old cliché DOA ever presently on your way black on black crime. Put that nigga to sleep! Put 'em to sleep!

Black is beautiful, black is beautiful as Ruby Dee and Isaac Davis showin' a (inaudible) love to each other... black is beautiful, black is beautiful as three generations gathered around one dentist table, but yo we ugly too—we beautiful, but we ugly too. Ugly as Tupac's bloodied body left lifeless on the Vegas strip we—beautiful, but we ugly too... ugly as the third teenager killed in Chicago last month Derrion Albert outnumbered—in an out of consciousness, body brutally beaten, body brutally beaten... brains bashed in—flesh beaten by boys not yet man, brutally beaten—outnumbered 3pm... Chicago inner-city brawl for Monday after school special. This is reality TV, the real Real World, True Life, for real Survivor except here, you don't get voted off, your own people kill you off. Brutally beaten, boys turned temporary beasts... this ain't Afghanistan it's the south side of Chicago...

While the poem does not make a direct call for a specific action, the artist uses the poem itself to challenge a particular mindset he believes is at the core of black on black violence. In addition to emotionally charged performances, poets also utilized techniques such as: calling people out, humor, poignant metaphors, vivid imagery, personalization, and profanity/shock value to deliver messages about any array of social ills including domestic violence, STDS, abortion, health, body image and objectification, racism, sexism, relationships, phobias, and politics.

*Techniques.* Poets often “called people out” on behavior they found to be problematic, using their poems to “school” others in an attempt to create dissonance and cause the offending individuals to align their beliefs and actions with those of the artist. One young woman explained that her poem was to someone that called her a bitch. Throughout the poem she explains the origins of the word bitch and scolds those who use it out of context. She calls out women, who use the word toward one another, as insecure individuals who have fallen victim to a sexist culture. She also chastises men for using

the word bitch as a synonym for woman, calling them out as antifeminist people who lack a command of the English language:

Have you always compared dimes to canines...this bitch not bad- lookin' like a bag of money. This is not Wayne's world where everything's cool as long as my bitches love me- *but* you've probably gotten your vocabulary from the distorted pool of rap- where women's sole purpose is to look pretty and make it clap. Must I tie you down and strap a thinking cap to the top of that fitted hat? ...bitch's original use... documented back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century... a high sexual desire in a woman similar to a dog in heat... our limited command of language has made us really stupid so you might just meet the criteria of the passage I quoted if you are a woman who refused to translate your words to sugar coat it. Ladies and gentleman- modern definition of bitch dually noted. And then there are the women who refer to other women as bitches- cyanide spit off their tongues in envy covered pitches- pull down your skirt I can see your insecurity. That woman you just called a bitch has a name, probably a job maybe a child, history of love gone wrong and a host of other shit. You do not know her, but you *think* you do in the words of Jeezy only god can judge me-who the fuck are you? I need to know when bitch became a synonym for a woman who is bold. When did this become the piss poor use of language we were so easily sold *or* are you simply a bitch if you're unwilling to withhold and refuse to be controlled by the bullshit principles we're always told...

One of the downfalls to the challenger self using this technique is that the artist risks coming off as arrogant and pretentious causing those being "called out" to become defensive, in which case the poem simply becomes a rant and fails to inspire change.

Using humor to address social issues, as well as the beliefs and behaviors that contribute to them, is often better received since audience members are less likely to feel attacked.

The following poem excerpt is an example of a carefully crafted humorous poem and performance designed to make visible the irrational fears that often underlie homophobia:

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Homophobia. Homophobia: the fear of homosexuals, but what exactly is there to be afraid of? Let's say that one day, you're shopping in the Mall of America with your teenage son and *you* spot a homosexual (thrashes around like a monster and changes voice to sound scary). This homosexual immediately drag your son to the nearest Banana Republic, fill him up with... spring collection until he's no more than a walking, lisping... novel. (switches



back to regular voice) Oh, suburban, white mother. Merely seeing this homosexual not turning your Wally Clever of a son into some fashionista screaming queen. One day, you might need to drop your husband off at the doctor for a prostate exam. Just because the doctor happens to be gay doesn't mean that (starts thrashing around making monster sounds like he's morphing into something) the gay doctor will... gently massaging your husband's prostate with his index and middle finger, but before long- it will turn into a full-blown physical fisting and soon... new friends, new friends named Bruce that always wear leather chaps (slaps his butt- laughter in audience). Just because your husband sees a gay doctor doesn't mean you'll have to run to the smitten kitten for a set of anal beads (laughter). Your sex life will remain as vanilla as possible, every Wednesday night like clockwork (laughter). Gentlemen, you have it on my honor (holds up two fingers like boy scout honor) that it is safe to send your wife to the Home Depot to pick up some grout... The Home Depot is simply a quality home improvement superstore, not some queer meat market (thrashes and morphs back to monster voice) The Home Depot is the Sodom and Gomorrah of modern time (laughter). You might as well buy the wifeepoo a one-way ticket to the eye of the lesbos. And you sir, are not safe there either. The place is crawling with gay do-it-yourselfers... (morphs back to regular voice) Gay people are everywhere (morphs back to monster voice) because they're taking over. Every time a... gay does your wife's hair, he's just filling her up chemicals, so she'll lactate homo milk into the mouths of our babes (audience laughter) and soon, we'll all be forced to bow down before the might of the rainbow (raises arm in air) flag (morphs back to regular voice) And there is nothing you can do to stop it- *bitches* (laughter and cheering).

The use of poignant metaphors was another way of disarming the audience when attempting to deliver, particularly sensitive, messages. Generally the poet will lead you to think they are talking about one thing and then at the end of the poem you find out that in fact they're discussing something totally different. For example, spoken word artist Messiah has a poem in which you believe he is describing a female boxer. He describes her as a champion boxer who even knocks men out in the ring. It is not until the end of the poem that Messiah uses the word HIV and we realize the boxing terminology was a metaphor for a promiscuous female passing HIV onto her partners and that the poem is a warning against contracting STDS.

One way of really making poems “hit home” was through vivid imagery and personalization. Artists accomplished this by taking away listeners’ ability to distance themselves from social problems—moving them from the abstract to the specific and from the impersonal to the individual. One of my students wrote a poem titled “In the Name of Justice” about the recent killings of young black men whose murderers have not been held accountable. The vivid imagery throughout the poem forces listeners to move from bland non-descriptive newspaper headlines to vivid images of the racist brutality that killed these men and permeates a nation, which prides itself on humanitarianism (poem is shown in the original format submitted by the author with the exception of omitted sections indicated by ellipsis):

To Michael  
Trayvon  
Oscar  
and every other brown face that white privilege tries to white out  
IM SORRY-  
That your bodies are used for target practice,  
while your souls hang from judicial branches  
Your faces painted across jaded city murals  
Legacies plastered against remembrance T-shirts--  
But you know,  
They say cleanliness is next to Godliness,  
I guess that’s why America bathes herself in the blood of my brothers  
But.  
black bodies get body bagged entirely too often  
Blood shed paints policing pigs pure,  
... I bet they had no idea  
at 3 that the same chalk used to illustrate their imagination  
would be the same used to outline their cold body 15 years later  
... Feet planted in justice  
Revolution lying somewhere between bloody cement and thousands of candles  
burning across states,  
Lighting the souls of our ancestors  
  
And to all that still have feet

to run from lead bullets  
that make you jump like third grade hop scotch  
Know that they value you not as creations to be cradled  
but rather 3/5s short of nothing lying in a coffin...

In the following poem about the unfair treatment of military Lieutenant Dan Choi, after he announced he was gay, the poet attempts to remove the distance audience members may see between someone they've never met (Dan Choi) and themselves. The artist achieves this by drawing parallels with Lieutenant Choi's experiences and his own. By getting audience members to connect with the person physically present on stage they are more likely to be empathetic and open to the message:

I don't know lieutenant Dan Choi. I've never experienced military training. Have not been willing to engage in hand-to-hand combat for my country. Have never learned Arabic, loved it and mastered it like a native. I don't know what it is to lose something I love doing, simply by loving. I cannot pretend to understand what it is to speak of my boyfriend on national television and then have my government tell me that I no longer have a job. I do not know lieutenant Dan Choi. But I remember middle school. I spent years perfecting that dance I danced to earn the approval of people who neither liked nor deserve me. I prayed for invitations to parties, I didn't want to attend, simply for the knowledge that somebody wanted me there. I hoped to walk past that lunch table and make myself just normal enough not to be laughed at. I remember middle school. And I gave it up at age 12. So I wonder, while everyone rightly defends Lieutenant Choi's right to serve his country, why no one seems to question *why he even wants to* (clapping). Why after proving his worth he is still willing to dance for those who do not see a strong salute... but only a limp wrist. We are that rare minority with no blood family in this. Endless generations of bastards our parents were not like us. Our children will never share this in common and we spend our whole lives looking for acceptance- wanting to be wanted by the ones who will never want us...

The technique of using profanity/shock value to get a message across was one of the least utilized, but most effective in garnering media attention. Afram broke into mainstream media, particularly through a song encouraging literacy that was shown on Black Entertainment Television (BET), which resulted in interviews on CNN, The

Michael Baisden Show, and Jesse Jackson's Keep Hope Alive. While many African American educators and D.C. community members embraced the song and its satirical music video, riddled with stereotypes about the African American community, not all did as Afram shared before a performance:

I'm infamous or famous or whatever for doing the song that went "READ A BOOK! READ A BOOK! – READ A MOTHERFUCKIN' BOOK! ... that got me in a lot of trouble. Jesse Jackson officially came out against me and shit which is like a high point of my life (laughter) I actually went on his radio show...

The controversy over Afram's song highlighted a rift between many of the older and younger generations of African American activists around the use of profanity and negative imagery/shock value in getting positive messages across to youth. Whether viewers related to the song and were inspired to change their behavior or were appalled by it and sought to debate Afram in the media, his work was arguably successful in drawing attention to literacy/problematic mindsets by evoking emotions and action.

*The word is not enough.* Although many poets felt that poetry itself served as a form of activism, Lexie challenged this belief stating that it "does a lot of work," but it is a, "copout that the word is enough." She elaborated stating, "I think there has to be other work and I have again, you know contemporaries and very close friends that are in marches and protests and doing things and um I think that's all necessary..." Lexie was not alone in her belief that a multi-pronged approach was needed. I came to find that almost every poet interviewed was somehow connected to the field of education and/or social services based on their desire to create positive social change. Artists frequently

mentioned that they specifically chose these occupations because they did not interfere with their participation in poetry and activism. In many cases, spoken word and social justice actually played a central role in their jobs. It became clear that for these artists poetry was not merely a hobby, but rather a way of life dedicated to bettering society.

Guy and Jessica work with child survivors of abuse and trauma. Guy specifically uses poetry as a form of art therapy to help children heal from traumatic experiences and plans to launch a campaign to discuss the, “the ugliness that we see in the world... and how... we rise above it, challenge it... create a safe space for these things and live beautiful... create... beauty for our lives and the lives of others.” JBT and Guy are both employed through Jane’s organization, which runs poetry workshops for local youth and educates them about social justice. In addition, they, along with Jessica, serve as youth slam competition coaches and host open mics at Political Poets. JBT spoke at length about how social justice ties into his everyday life:

... I like to believe that my life and the way that I lead my life um is part of the solution and the way that I teach my students uh and the way that I model for them uh cross-cultural dialogue and um building allies um in different movements and lending our poetry -our voice to other people’s movements, even though that might not be our own biggest issue ta-ta-ta stand side by side and so um not to-not only be reactionary. Of course we are reactionary, when somethin’ happens we’ll go out there, when you know, the uh um when-when the verdict uh for George Zimmerman came out and you know-you know he murdered this teenager um and-and he was uh pronounced not guilty, our students went out and we had a protest and we did a big thing and like we encouraged that and helped them do that, but also to be proactive and to try to be preventing some of these things from happening and to be educating our students um about the criminal justice system, about the racism that is inherent in that institution as well as many others in the United States, um an-and to set them on the right path where they’re not only upset about it all, as they should be, but they’re finding uh positive and creative solutions to it... poetry saves lives um and it sounds cliché to some people, but when you’re actually in this community, you see it happen um and you lead people whose lives have been utterly and completely transformed, *by* the art form

and it's not always the people who are up on stage; it's not always the ones who are in the limelight or are very famous for it. Um, but the process of writing and sharing your poetry is *healthy* and it's good for humans to do it, um and so that's something that I promote everywhere that I go.

Keith also works as an educator with a college prep program for minority students from low socio-economic backgrounds. He expressed the significance of giving back to his own community through providing resources to help the next generation succeed and serving as a role model/pseudo father. Keith often refers to himself in social media posts as a "proudpapa" in reference to his students' accomplishments or a "bassvoicepapa," when he is informed of any trouble they have gotten into. He also does surprise visits to their high schools when they've been acting out and sends care packages to them once they've started college. One of the more infamous activist voices was that of Afram.

Afram home schools his children, due to disagreements with the material in his children's former curriculum, and works as a teaching artists at various middle schools. He is active in addressing social problems on both a personal and institutional level:

The organizations that I'm a part of- I mean shoot- I have issues with the war on drugs and so I donate and collaborate with... law enforcement against prohibition. I want to see all drugs legalized within my lifetime. Um, I am- worried about the school system, so my other job is in the school system; it's also why I home school... so it's a very active thing that I'm a part of. I try not to- I try not to just-talk about things; if I'm not gonna do anything I'm not gonna bring it up. I didn't vote for Obama because he did not promise to end the drug war... I'm like that serious youknowwhati'msayin?

*Organizing and education.* D.C. area poets have been successful in advancing poetry as a social change agent through their centralized organizing and educational programming. The Poets for Solidarity Organization works in partnership with Political

Poets and is the largest organizing and educational initiative in D.C. The organization came to fruition through Jane's search for "a community... of writers that were deeply engaged in social issues." Unable to find the kind of community Jane longed for, she took it upon herself to organize a group of D.C. poets opposed to the Iraq war. This group later became the foundation for an international multiday poetry festival from which the Poets for Solidarity Organization was created:

... *I didn't wanna continue our focus just on the war- because we were all writing- we all write about all kinds of social issues... it was time to do something on a larger scale. And there was no poetry festival in D.C. of any kind. Uh, the one evening event that's called a poetry festival, but it's just a-a one-day thing-it's not even a whole day. So we... dreamed up this crazy idea of- and we didn't know if it'd be just a one time event, um, but it would be a gathering of activist poets um a national gathering here... and, you know, the fact that we're in the nation's capitol we had both the opportunity, kind of, and the responsibility, I felt, uh to do that- to call poets together... We raised almost a \$100,000 for the first festival, which was quite incredible- um, people were so moved by it- funders and, you know, institutional funders and individuals. Um, it was really amazing and money that, you know, we didn't know existed kind of came out of the woodwork. So, um and it, you know, it was exactly what we hoped it'd be- a national gathering of all different kinds of people...um, and it ended up being this kind of hybrid event of festival, conference, political action and that's the mix we've kept since then, of um readings, panels and workshops and conversations, open mics and then activism...*

The Poets for Solidarity Organization is responsible for putting on the biennial multiday poetry festival as well as: hosting readings and workshops (including a monthly poetry series at Political Poets), providing youth programming (including competitions, open mics, and weekly workshops at school and libraries), sponsoring contests and awards, running an independent publication, and collaborating with numerous community partners and media outlets. These organizational components stem directly from their mission statement:

The Poets for Solidarity Organization calls poets to a greater role in public life and fosters a national network of socially engaged poets. Building the audience for poetry of provocation and witness from our home in the nation's capital, we celebrate poetic diversity and the transformative power of the imagination.

Poets for Solidarity explores and celebrates the many ways that poetry can act as an agent for change: reaching across differences, considering personal and social responsibility, asserting the centrality of the right to free speech, bearing witness to the diversity and complexity of human experience through language, imagining a better world. Poets for Solidarity is dedicated to revitalizing poetry as a living, breathing art form with profound relevance in our daily lives and struggles. Our programs integrate poetry of provocation and witness into movements for social justice and support the poets of all ages who write and perform this vital work... The work of writing the poems that split open the injustices in society is in some ways a solitary act, but it is also an act that requires community...

The Poets for Solidarity Organization youth programming has been hugely successful in preparing the next generation of socially and politically conscious teaching artists and community members. Students coached and mentored by JBT, Guy, and Lexie have maintained close ties with the D.C. spoken word community and often go on to become educators, coaches, and mentors themselves. For example, prior to hosting at Political Poets and being hired as a teaching artist with Poets for Solidarity, Guy was mentored by a community elder. Even my own spoken word course is linked to Poets for Solidarity as I work with JBT to funnel alumni from my poetry program into his slam team coaching course, which prepares college students to serve as competitive spoken word coaches and mentors at local high schools. Additionally, one of JBT's former high school slam team members took the spoken word course I teach and later served as my intern and teaching assistant. This student is one of the most requested hosts and performers at the university for his activist poetry. He has maintained ties with Poets for Solidarity through facilitating the youth workshops he was nurtured by and was recently hired by Political



Poets as an open mic host. It is this sort of interconnectedness and cohesion that allows D.C. poets to organize so effectively. Rather than creating numerous smaller disjointed groups there is one central organization (Poets for Solidarity) and space (Political Poets) that all of the local programs and organizations feed into or are affiliated with, which disseminates information and coordinates joint action and initiatives. Adding to the uniqueness and effectiveness of the D.C. spoken word community is the number of activist artists who hold post secondary degrees and positions of influence within the government and school system. Due to the small geographical space that the Washington metropolitan area is comprised of, many of these individuals graduated from and currently work for the same educational institutions and government agencies—easily transitioning from classmates to colleagues. Therefore, with strategic planning, there is the possibility to collectively work toward structural change that addresses social inequality through the transformation of mandated and supplemental curricula and by proposing and amending legislation.

## Conclusion

I began this research with a desire to find out how spoken word participants utilized the medium, with a focus on themes, self, and society. By employing the grounded theory method I was able to identify why many artists participate in spoken word and how they use the art form. Four recurring themes emerged: 1) *Writing the Self Out of Trouble*, 2) *Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity through Reflexive Practice*, 3) *Community*, and 4) *Poetry as a Form of Activism*. Five main types of public selves surfaced: 1) *the Passionate Self*, 2) *the Survivor/Helper*, 3) *the Reformer/Activist*, 4) *the Challenger*, and 5) *the Humorous Self*. The Passionate Self followed by the Activist/Reformer and Challenger Selves were the most commonly displayed public selves. Perhaps the large focus on romantic relationships, by the Passionate Self, reflects a level of importance placed on such relationships by society and/or an area of social relations plagued by great tension and conflict as romantic relationship poems were most often about problems rather than happiness and contentment. The frequent displays of the Activist/Reformer and Challenger Selves came as no surprise with the seemingly wide-held belief, within the spoken word community, that poetry should be used toward a moral end, or for ‘humanization’ as Medina would say.

The types of selves often fell within particular themes. The Passionate and the Survivor/Helper Selves repeatedly came up when writing the self out of trouble and in poems about self-identity (Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity through Reflexive Practice). The Reformer/Activist and Challenger selves emerged primarily when poets sought to use their poetry as a form of activism; however, the Challenger Self was also prevalent in relation to self-identity (Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity through Reflexive Practice). The Humorous Self generally served as a means of bonding between the artist and audience and was mainly exhibited within the theme of community. It is important to note that similar to the dynamicness of a personality enneagram, in which an individual flows between expression of their dominant personality type, shades of the adjacent personality types, or even additional connected personality types when faced with particular circumstances or phases of their lives, the poets also frequently expressed one or more public selves within a singular poem. Therefore, while specific public selves tended to fall within the same themes, it was possible for them to appear in one or more, as all of the selves did or could have.

Regardless of why they performed, what they spoke about, or which public selves they portrayed, artists were asking their audiences to engage in the process of *verstehen*. Poets were requesting that members of the audience attempt to understand what they spoke about from their point of view by sharing their experiences, feelings, beliefs, and worldviews. Even within humorous poems, artists were calling for audience members to view certain topics from a funny and amusing perspective, as they did. Mead's emphasis on social experience as a guiding factor in shaping personalities and assisting in the

creation of self was quite evident in the numerous poems that spoke of personal experiences and the types of selves particular artists expressed most frequently. Reflexivity, as focused on by Mead and Giddens, was also present and apparent through the large use of narratives in which artists reflected on their life experiences and feelings in relation to self and identity, as demonstrated in the Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity through Reflexive Practice theme. Within spoken word artists are able to maintain particular narratives of self by continually reinforcing them within the poetry they publically perform. However, such narratives may be interrupted if the artist is known to act in ways that contradict the self or selves they present in front of audiences. Thus, Giddens (2008:108), is correct in asserting that one must maintain a strong narrative, “which can explain everything that has happened,” and that such a narrative must be “creatively and continuously maintained.” Part of the success of famous spoken word artists is their ability to convince audiences to interpret behaviors and events, in their lives and society, in the same manner in which the artists themselves do. To achieve this poets may utilize the techniques of impression management, presented by Goffman (1952:6), to “influence the definition of the situation” their audiences come to have. When artists were unable to successfully do this—e.g. their actions off stage were not congruent with what they espoused onstage—they were deemed to be inauthentic. Interestingly, in the case of character stigmas, rather than hiding/managing them, some poets used high rates of self-disclosure to expose and redefine stigma in an attempt to reduce and/or eliminate it, which could actually lead to

them being viewed as authentic in an art form that places a premium on sharing ones' truth.

Poets frequently wrote poems to process difficult situations and found catharsis in performing. Many sought to not only empower themselves, but others who may have faced similar situations. Open mics provide a space where performers, regardless of their talent or place in society, are actively listened to and supported. They fulfill a need for people to connect face to face with one another in an age of technology. Despite being able to watch events online, many poetry events in the D.C. area are routinely sold out demonstrating the desire audience members and poets have for a sense of community. Given poets' propensity for sharing resources, touting one another's accolades, supporting each other's goals, sharing daily lived experiences, and often spending a significant amount of time with one another it could even be argued that the poetry scene serves as an ad hoc family. Perhaps what makes this sort of community so desirable is that a participant can partake as regularly or infrequently as they would like without repercussions and can maintain a degree of anonymity by using a pen/stage name, choosing which poems they share at particular venues, and the understanding that poems which appear to be personal can actually be the stories of others. Therefore, there is little cost and often a high degree of reward (community support) for ones' participation.

As evidenced throughout the research, poetry serves several important societal functions. Perhaps one of the most important is its role in combating social injustice. Most poets felt that poetry in and of itself was a political act. However, if poets solely rely on their messages inspiring change, then social justice is ultimately dependent

on the actions of listeners. If we truly want to address the inequities so frequently referenced by poets then we must have a cohesive strategy, which includes micro and macro level components and addresses the structural causes of inequality.

Perhaps the best structural approach may be to continue finding ways to penetrate current school curricula (infusing it with spoken word) at both the K-12 and collegiate levels in order to combat student disengagement, boost literacy and political engagement, and establish the legitimacy needed to fend off the critics and gain acceptance from the canon shapers. Maybe what is needed is a slam competition between the current and proposed curricula. However, there is always the risk that once “legitimized” and “institutionalized” that spoken word may lose its way and consequently its *self*, becoming part of what it has so often opposed—a form of cultural capital for the elite—rather than being a culture and art form that has served as a means for oppressed groups to challenge and transform society while educating its artists and audiences. Future studies might examine the role spoken word has played and continues to play in social movements as well as who spoken word consumers are and if listening to spoken word has inspired them to engage in behaviors and activities aimed at decreasing social injustice, which they otherwise would not have.

One main limitation of the study was that even with recordings of many of the poets’ performances, exact words could not always be made out. Another shortcoming of examining artistic material is its subjective nature. Without speaking to the artists it is not possible to know if the poems were in fact about their own experiences and identities, nor if my interpretations of their poems were in fact correct. As an artist I personally have

composed poems as if they were about another person when they were about my own experiences or circumstances in order to maintain a sense of privacy; conversely I have also written about the situations of others in manners that viewers might interpret as being my own. However, what an artist specifically intends to communicate and whether or not it is autobiographical may not necessarily be important. Regardless of the author's intent, various public selves will be displayed and members of the audience may take numerous messages away. Therefore research on art will always be inherently subjective. However, viewing art against the backgrounds and perspectives of its creators can provide some framework in which to better understand it. Therefore it is significant to note that while the racial makeup of audiences varied from event to event, overall the majority of the poets and audience members appeared to be African American, which accounts for the large focus on African American identities and communities within artists' poems. As previously explored in the review of the literature and evidenced in the findings, there are indeed strong ties to African and African American cultures within the larger North American spoken word community.

## Appendix A: Pilot Study Face Sheet

Name/Pen Name\_\_\_\_\_

Year you were born\_\_\_\_\_ current age\_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following describes your gender identity:

Male\_\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_\_ Transgender\_\_\_\_

What city/state do you currently reside in?\_\_\_\_\_

Would you describe that area as: Urban\_\_\_\_ Suburban\_\_\_\_ Rural\_\_\_\_

What was the religious affiliation of your parents growing up (if any)?

What is your current religious affiliation (if any)?

What is your cultural affiliation (refers to shared language, customs, beliefs etc.)

Describe your racial group affiliation (if you identify with more than one group please list all groups that you identify with)

What is your current occupation (includes student and stay-at-home parent)

What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Middle School\_\_\_\_ High School\_\_\_\_ Some College\_\_\_\_ Bachelor's Degree\_\_\_\_

Some Graduate School\_\_\_\_ Master's Degree\_\_\_\_ Doctoral Degree\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix B: Pilot Study Interview Protocol**

Tell me about your first experience with spoken word  
(where you lived, where you heard it (event, TV, DVD, CD), what age you were, who you were with, how it made you feel)

Have you studied poetry?

Where did you “grow up in” (spend majority of childhood in)?

Tell me about the experience of listening to spoken word

Do you perform spoken word?

Do you copyright your work?

Tell me about how you choose what you are going to perform?

How do you choose where you will perform?

Have you ever watched or participated in SLAM poetry?

What are your thoughts on SLAM poetry/competitions?

Is there a difference between spoken word and poetry?

Is there a difference between rap/hip hop and spoken word?

Do you have any interest in social activism?

What social causes/concerns are of greatest interest to you?

Do you utilize spoken word to discuss your views on activism or politics?

Does social activism play a role in spoken word to you? How?

How often do you attend spoken word events?

Do you find there are different types of spoken word artists?

Who are your favorite spoken word artists?

What do you like about these artists? What draws you into their work?

Tell me about any specific books/poems/art that have had a significant impact on you

### Appendix C: Interview Face Sheet

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Which of the following describes your gender identity:

Male\_\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_\_ Transgender\_\_\_\_

What city/state(s) did you grow up in? \_\_\_\_\_

What city/state do you currently reside in? \_\_\_\_\_

Would you describe that area as: Urban\_\_\_\_ Suburban\_\_\_\_ Rural\_\_\_\_

What is your cultural affiliation (refers to shared language, customs, beliefs etc.)

Describe your racial group affiliation (if you identify with more than one group please list all groups that you identify with)

What is your current occupation (includes student and stay-at-home parent)

What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Middle School\_\_\_\_ High School\_\_\_\_ Some College\_\_\_\_ Bachelor's Degree\_\_\_\_

Some Graduate School\_\_\_\_ Master's Degree\_\_\_\_ Doctoral Degree\_\_\_\_

Do you write and perform poetry? Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

Have you studied poetry in an academic/school setting? Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

Comments\_\_\_\_\_

How often do you attend spoken word events? \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D: Interview Protocol**

Are there different types of spoken word artists- how would you categorize them?

Who are your favorite spoken word artists?

What do you like about these artists? What draws you into their work?

Tell me about any specific books/poems/art that have had a significant impact on you.

What is the purpose of spoken word poetry?

Have you ever watched or participated in SLAM poetry?

What are your thoughts on SLAM poetry/competitions?

Tell me about your first experience with spoken word

(where you lived, where you heard it (event, TV, DVD, CD), what age you were, who you were with, how it made you feel)

Tell me about the experience of listening to spoken word

What inspires you to write poetry?

What topics do you write about and perform most often?

Why?

Do you share personal information/struggles in your poetry? Why?

Why do you think people feel comfortable sharing personal information/problems in public settings like open mic nights? Why do you think people share this information?

Do you feel a sense of community with other artists? Explain.

What made/makes you want to perform spoken word?

Tell me about how you choose what you are going to perform?

How do you choose where you will perform?

Do you have any interest in social activism?

What social problems are of greatest interest to you? Why?

Do you utilize spoken word to discuss your views/thoughts on social problems or politics?

Do you promote any type of activism through your poetry?

Do you do anything to actively combat the social problems you speak about (e.g. feed the homeless, peace corps, lobby congress...)

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## Biography

Naliyah is the Coordinator for Multiracial & Multicultural Student Involvement and Community Advocacy at the University of Maryland, College Park. She supports UMD's Multiracial and Native American Indian/Indigenous student communities through advising and co-curricular programming. Additionally, she is co-chair of the Inclusive Language Campaign, a mentor for UMD transfer students, and teaches courses in multiracial leadership and spoken word poetry/social justice.

As a "poetic public sociologist" Naliyah utilizes poetry as a medium for teaching and social change. She infuses poetry and photography into her sociological work and encourages students to utilize artistic expression as they examine their own identity, beliefs, and values and as a form of activism in promoting social justice. It is her hope that through this process of self-exploration students will embrace cultural pluralism, find commonalities across differences, and engage in research and dialogues that seek to benefit the greater good of society through positive social action.

Prior to joining the University of Maryland, Naliyah taught sociology courses at Lawson State Community College and spent five years at George Mason University as a Teaching and Research Assistant within the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and as the Global Proficiency Certificate Program (GPC) Coordinator in the Office of International Programs and Services. She also served as a Cultural Advisor with both the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange & Study (YES) and Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX) programs through the U.S. Department of State.

A native of Washington State, Naliyah grew up just outside of Seattle. She earned an A.A.S. from Shoreline Community College, a B.A. in sociology from Hampton University, and received her M.A. in sociology at George Mason University. Her poetry has been published in *Spindrift Art & Literary Journal* (2002, 2010), Hampton University's *Saracen* (2005, 2006), George Mason University's *Volition* (2010) and *Voices of the Future* Presented by Etan Thomas (2013).